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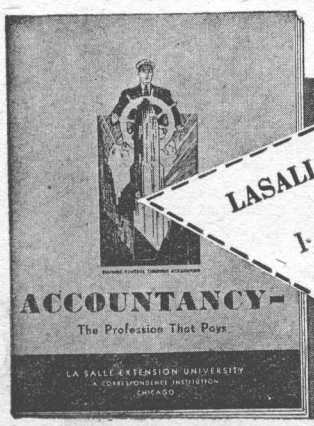

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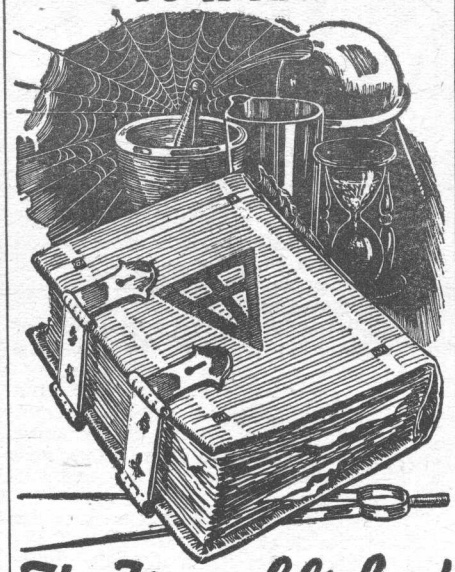

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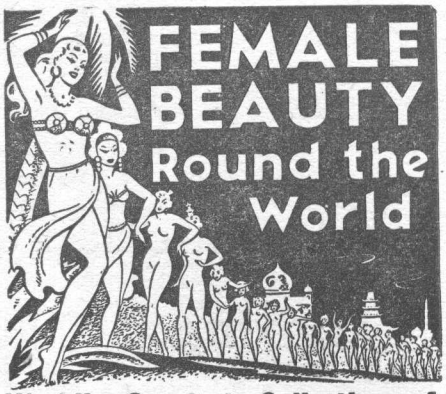

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Midnight Train

I

O'REILLY'S ceremonial farewell to India was a magnificent affair. All the Maharajah's twenty elephants were lined up in the square opposite the palace, their restless trunks painted white and vermillion like sinuous barber poles, their howdahs glittering in the burning glare of the tropical sun.

Perched aboard the largest bull of the twenty, the one with the gold-and-diamond studded tusks, was Terrence O'Reilly himself, his massive frame hunched to fit in among the plush and spangles of a howdah designed for lesser men than an ex-New York cop.

The resplendent uniform which O'Reilly was wearing for the last time, dazzling with more gold braid than a circus band master, was wet with perspiration. His bright red hair, too, was dewy beneath his gold-spiked sun helmet.

Yet despite the heat he had a funny cold feeling inside him and a strange lump in his throat. He wondered why he should feel like this about going home to become Patrolman O'Reilly of the Ninth Precinct again, instead of O'Reilly Sahib, Marshal of Personal Safety to His Highness Vinayak Rao Bahadur, Maharajah of Zarapore. Then he looked off across the square to where the green-coated, green-turbaned palace guards were drawn up at attention, and his angular, bull-dog jaw worked sidewise.

The guards were firing off a loud and ragged *feu de joie* with muskets that had seen service in the Sepoy Rebellion. The palace musicians were beating on ancient drums, blowing into squealing wind instruments, raising awful sounds from copper trumpets so long that it took three small boys to hold them off the ground.

The sabers of the Maharajah's aides flashed in salute, and the brilliant mosaic made by the turbans of the watching crowd bent forward to salaam like poppies before a breeze. The Maharajah emerged to mount the throne beneath the five golden umbrellas on the palace steps.

THE horns blared again, and the Maharajah began his public goodbyes to O'Reilly Sahib. He spoke in Urdu, and O'Reilly did not understand a fifth of what he was saying, but he knew the content. His Highness had said the same thing in English the week before when he broke the news over a bottle of champagne.

"I can't help myself, Terry," the Maharajah had said. "The British *raj* is clamping down all the war-time regulations, and they've told me to dismiss all aliens in my service.

"I haven't forgotten you've saved my life. I never shall. And I promised you that your job was permanent. I know you wouldn't want to give up your American citzenship, though, so I'm sending you back to New York. My bankers in the States will continue to pay your salary, so you can live like a pensioner, if you like."

"Pensioner, my eye!" O'Reilly had said. "I'm going back on the force. I'll be a sergeant in another year, and that brings all the dough a man like me needs. The pension can go to buying a little house over in Brooklyn just for my old lady."

"I'll miss you, Terry," the Maharajah had said.

"Sure. And I'll miss you, too, Vinnie," O'Reilly had replied glibly. He had said it to be polite, but now as he looked out on all this pomp and display of a feudal, Oriental state, he knew it was true.

For all the heat and homesickness of the gasping nights before the monsoons broke, when he would have given anything for the smell of snow on the wind from East River, the whiff of bacon from an all-night Coffee Pot, or the scraping sound of a snow-shovel on a frozen sidewalk—for all that, he was at this moment sorry to leave.

He knew that when he got back to the roar of the subway, the routine of the station house, the flash of traffic lights and the scream of sirens, he would be thinking of this carnival of pomp and poverty, of strange brown and black faces, of whiskers and turbans among the turnip-like domes and heat and dust of Zarapore.

He would be thinking of the young Maharajah whom he had saved from the conspiracy of an ambitious brother; of the chubby brown *subadar* of civil police whom he had taught to play poker, and who had helped him put down a Hindu-Moslem riot almost single-handed; of the Mad Yogi with a Tenth Avenue accent, who had taken a hand in the game after the affair of the opium factory in Ganeshi Mohan's private temple.

Well, Fate had whisked him to India as bodyguard for a Hindu prince, and he could not quarrel with Fate now that the magic carpet was making a return trip. . .

THE horns squealed and howled again, and O'Reilly climbed down from his elephant. His six-feet-four towered above the flanking A.D.C.'s as he marched forward to the throne for the ceremonial award of a *pugaree*. A *pugaree* is like a turban except that it is narrower and is one hundred sixty-six feet long to a turban's thirty, and is consequently more complicated to wind.

But when it is awarded by a Maharajah, it is like a medal for bravery and carries a rise in pay or a pension with it. So O'Reilly understood that the matter of his pension had to be arranged according to the customs of Zarapore and dutifully bent down while two expert turban-winders removed his helmet and went to work weaving an intricate structure of brilliant cloth strips upon his head.

When he looked up at the Maharajah, however, he was startled. The young man in all his regalia of satin and jewels was not the breezy, confident young ruler he had expected to see. There was a haunted, haggard look on his handsome face, a strange pallor under his olive-tinted skin.

"What's wrong, Vinnie?" O'Reilly muttered under his breath while the turban-winders were putting the finishing touches on the *pugaree*.

"I want to talk to you after the ceremony," the Maharajah murmured in tense English. "Come and see me in an hour. I'll be in my private diggings."

"I'll be there, Your Highness," said O'Reilly. He beamed as he straightened up and saluted. The thought that there was still trouble for him to get into before he left Zarapore made him so elated that he forgot to feel foolish in his new *pugaree*. . . . Returning to the palace after divesting himself of his uniform, his *pugaree*, and the smell of elephant, O'Reilly found the Maharajah nervously pacing the thick rugs of his private apartments. There was never any formality about him when he received his American friend, but there was even less of the potentate than usual in his manner today. He was merely a very worried young man who had stripped off his turban and his court clothes and was wearing only a pair of shorts and a deep frown.

"Terry, I'm going to ask you do me one more favor before you leave India," said the Maharajah, running his nervous fingers through his sleek black hair. "Don't answer until you've heard the story, because you may not want to do it. It may be dangerous."

"That's swell," said O'Reilly, grinning. "When do I start?"

"I suppose you know about the fire in my government laboratories last night."

"Yeah. Too bad."

"And that Dr. Khopri was burned to death?"

"Was he? They didn't tell me that." O'Reilly shook his head. "Khopri was a nice fella. Tough luck."

"It wasn't luck, Terry." The Maharajah came over and stared hard at O'Reilly with a strange fire burning deep in his dark eyes. "It could have been an accident that all of Dr. Khopri's notes and records were destroyed, but that he himself should die, that he should be there at such an odd hour of the night—"

"Murder, eh?" O'Reilly arose and picked up his Malacca stick, as though ready for instant duty. "Who—"

"Sit down, Terry. It's quite a story. Did I tell you about the manganese deposits in the Nila Hills, ten miles from here?"

"Not that I remember."

The Maharajah passed a silver box of cigarettes. O'Reilly waved them away and took a Burma cheroot from his pocket.

"THERE'S no need to tell you, Terry," said the Maharajah, holding a match for O'Reilly, "that I'm devoted to the British cause in this war. Even if I hadn't been educated at Oxford, I'd be a rabid partisan. Any intelligent man would.

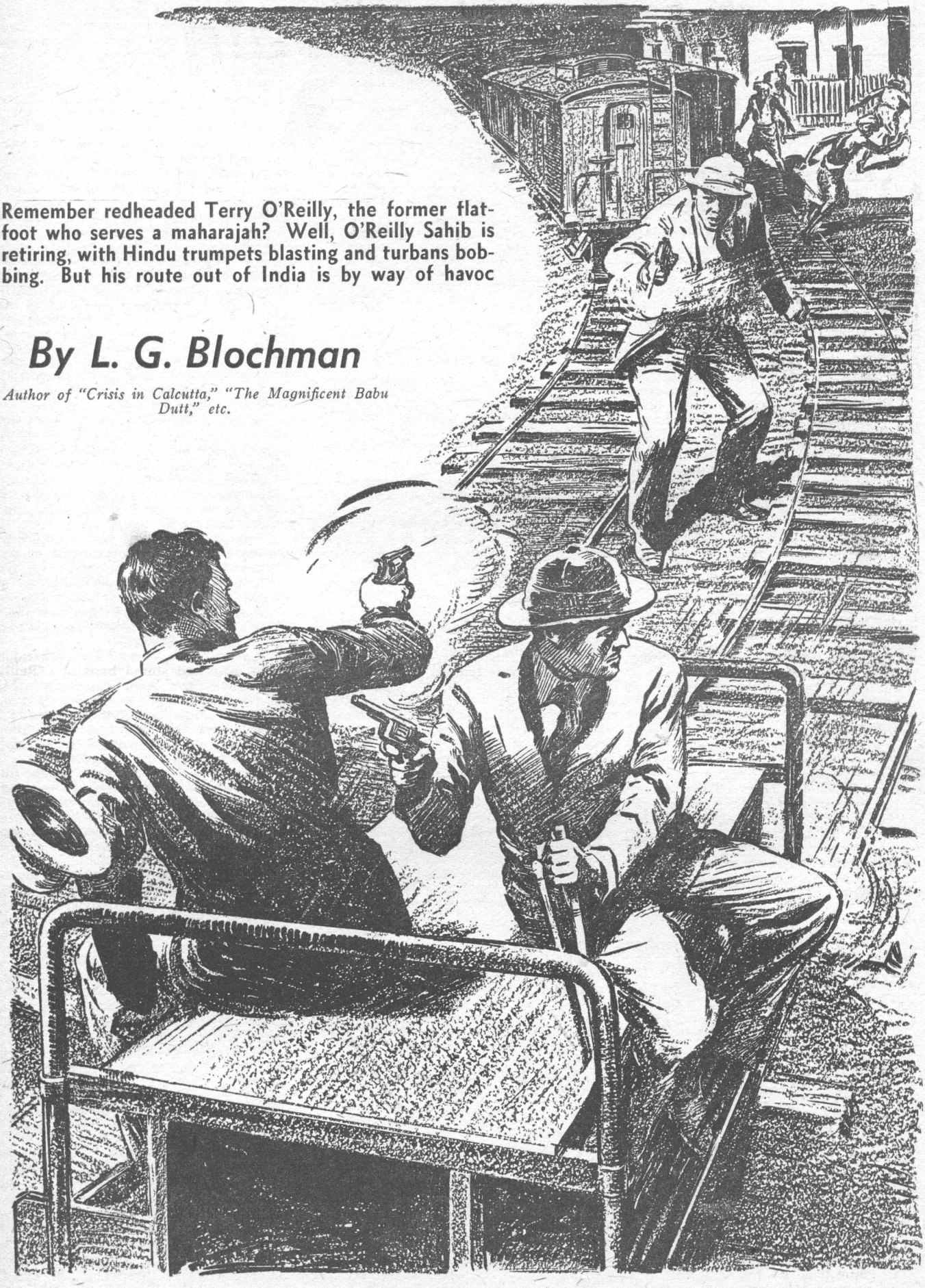
"Well, when Dr. Khopri told me several months ago that he had discovered manganese in my state, I immediately communicated with Delhi. Manganese is a strategic material, you know. Steel and armaments. And there's never enough of it.

"Well, Delhi sent down a government mineralogist by the name of Henry Fayne. I disliked him instantly, but that has nothing to do with the man's ability. I even believed him when he reported that the supposed manganese deposits were really a freak—that the Nila Hills had been 'salted' by nature. Thousands of years ago a shower of meteorites pelted down on this part of India, and since the fragments are rich in manganese, the soil still shows traces of it, he

Remember redheaded Terry O'Reilly, the former flatfoot who serves a maharajah? Well, O'Reilly Sahib is retiring, with Hindu trumpets blasting and turbans bobbing. But his route out of India is by way of havoc

By L. G. Blochman

Author of "Crisis in Calcutta," "The Magnificent Babu Dutt," etc.



The handcar gathered speed. O'Reilly aimed at it carefully and fired

said; but not nearly enough to warrant mining it.

"Since Fayne sent his report after he'd left Zarapore, I could not take issue with him. When I showed it to Dr. Khopri, however, he disagreed violenty. He pointed out that the manganese in meteorites is in its native form; that while some oxidation was certain to occur over a period of centuries, his own prospecting had revealed a uniformity of deposits which indicated a deep-seated mass of both manganite and braunite.

"I had great confidence in Dr. Khopri and supposed that Henry Fayne was merely mistaken. I asked Dr. Khopri to prepare his own report, with ore specimens, and was seeking some way I might tactfully reopen the matter. Then Dr. Khopri's death in the fire which destroyed his records made me change my mind. I no longer consider Henry Fayne incompetent. What do you think, Terry?"

O'Reilly whistled. "Fifth Column?" he suggested.

"Possibly," the Maharajah agreed. "The Germans would certainly try to prevent the development of new manganese fields and as much as I detest the Nazis, I must admit that they are thorough and far-reaching in their underground organization.

"There is another possibility, however. I always suspect my brother in matters of this kind. The intriguing fingers of Prince Mahmed are very long and very active, even from his exile in Goa.

"It is more likely that the Germans have got to him in Portuguese India, and that he is merely seeking to exploit the fields for commercial gains—after he steals my throne. I would rather think that Mr. Fayne is merely greedy, not a traitor."

"Where do I come in?" O'Reilly asked.

"IN this way," said the Maharajah, "I can't very well go to the Political Officer here because Mr. Henderson is a guileless scholar who would resent my implication that an official from Delhi might be betraying the interests of his country.

"I no longer have Dr. Khopri and his records to bear out my suspicions. I am forbidden by treaty from going over the Political Officer's head and dealing directly with Delhi. Therefore I am asking you to go to Delhi for me. Will you, Terry?"

"I won't be much good at explaining about the magna—about the rocks," O'Reilly said.

"I'm sending someone with you for that," the Maharajah said. "I'm sending Professor Gurda, a science teacher in my high school here, who had heard Dr. Khopri's theories, and who will be able to explain the ore samples I'm sending with you.

"I want you to see that the professor and the samples arrive safely at the mining office. And I want you to pretend that you and he are doing this independently—a pair of private prospectors, if you know what I mean. I want you to protect my official non-interference, so to speak, and still guarantee the Zarapore manganese deposits for Britain's war. That makes you more or less of a diplomat. Do you think you can manage it, Terry?"

"Sure. Why not? I thought you said this was dangerous."

"It is. The man who killed Dr. Khopri may be on your train tonight."

"I see." O'Reilly studied the glowing stub of his cheroot. "Who is he?"

"I wish I knew, Terry. Does that mean you say no?"

"Hell, no, I don't say no. On the contrary. Gives me something to think about on the train."

"If only Henry Fayne were still in Zarapore I should say the matter would be greatly simplified. But he left ten days ago. You know what he looks like, by the way?"

"Sure, I met him while he was here." O'Reilly nodded. "He's a skinny, red-faced sourpuss that looks like he's tried everything and don't like any of it."

"Good." The Maharajah smiled. "I'm glad you remember, in case he should turn up along the way. You'll do it, then, Terry?"

"Sure," said O'Reilly, extending his hand.

At this moment an aide-de-camp entered and made a peculiar grimace at the spectacle of the Maharajah, bare-waisted, shaking hands with the red-headed colossus.

O'Reilly immediately looked grim, straightened up, and saluted gravely. He said: "I'll do your bidding, your Highness."

The Maharajah looked as dignified as a man in shorts can. He replied. "Good. Then pleasant trip, O'Reilly Sahib."

When he left the palace, O'Reilly hadn't gone a dozen yards before somebody took a shot at him.

II

THE bullet spattered against the wall just above his head and showered plaster down upon his broad shoulders. At the same instant he recognized the grimly familiar report of a pistol shot.

He knew it was a shot because the only vehicles in the street at the time were bicycles, a horse-drawn *ghari*, and a bullock cart loaded with ripe jute—none of which were apt to backfire. The pedestrians in the crowded street looked innocent enough, too—fat Marwaris going home from the cotton bazaar, bearded Moslems, thin black Tamils, red-turbaned Sikhs.

None of them seemed to have heard the shot, unless it was the only European in sight—a plump, perspiring Anglican missionary whose clerical collar seemed to dissolve as he hurried down the street in pursiut of a carriage. No, the shot had probably been fired from one of the shuttered second-story windows above the shops across the road.

And there was no sense in looking for the marksman now; since he had missed, he would no doubt show up again later. The Maharajah was right in his guess that the murderer of Dr. Khopri would be aboard O'Reilly's train.

O'Reilly reached the station fifteen minutes before train time, without becoming a further target. His friends who came to see him off had been there at least an hour, inasmuch as the Hindu mind seems incapable of judging time in units as small as ten minutes.

The Maharajah, of course, was not there, but he had sent an A.D.C. with a heavy package which O'Reilly immediately clamped under his arm. It attracted no particular attention since all his friends had brought farewell gifts. The minister of education brought a set of poker chips carved from buffalo horn. The *subadar* of civil police contributed a *pan* box of hammered brass which had been beaten from the brass knuckles that killed Ganeshi Mohan. The Mad Yogi offered a stone jug of trance-provoking palm toddy.

Just as the train puffed into the station from the south, headlight boring into the hot darkness, whistle shrieking, O'Reilly's travelling companion came puffing into the station from the north.

Professor Gurda was a rotund little Hindu with buck teeth protruding from beneath a dejected black mustache and enough white turban piled above his bulging forehead to fill a good-sized laundry basket. He was so completely encumbered with cloth-tied baggage, brass pots, books, an umbrella, and what appeared to be a week's supply of food, that O'Reilly was afraid that if the professor put down his impedimenta to shake hands, he would never be able to collect it all again before the train pulled out.

"Howdy, Prof," O'Reilly said. "Looks like we're traveling in the same— Whoa, hold it!"

Professor Gurda tried to join the palms of his hands in front of his face, to make the customary salutation, and four books and a brass pot cascaded into O'Reilly's arms. Assuring himself by a side glance that his own bearers were loading his luggage and bedding roll into what appeared to be the only vacant first-class compartment, O'Reilly piled the books back on the professor and took his arm to guide him to the train.

"Goodbye, Johnny!" he called to the *subadar*. "Good luck, Diwana!" He shook outstretched hands. "Goodbye, mugs! I'll send you all picture postcards of Brooklyn Bridge."

The station master blew his whistle. The engineer answered shrilly. The train jerked, and the guard ran along the side of the cars, closing doors. O'Reilly boosted the professor aboard just as the train began to move. He slammed the door, turned to yell final goodbyes to the crowd on the platform. When he turned away again, he saw that two other European passengers were settling down in the compartment.

ONE of them at least was a European, and an Anglican missionary at that. He looked very much like the plump gentleman with the wilted clerical collar O'Reilly had seen hurrying away from the palace just after someone had taken a pot-shot at him.

He was for the moment busy with his luggage, so O'Reilly turned to eye the other passenger who might not be entirely European. He was a tall, sallow-faced, black-haired gentleman, and the cut of his elegant, well-pressed pongee suit was flawlessly English.

Something about the cast of his narrow eyes, however, and the purple crescents at the base of his polished fingernails told O'Reilly that there was a touch of the tar brush somewhere in his lineage.

The Eurasian favored O'Reilly with a greasy smile. "Good evening, Mr. O'Reilly," he said.

O'Reilly puckered his bushy red eyebrows. "What jail did we meet in?" he demanded.

The Eurasian chuckled. There was a cold, mirthless quality in the sound. "O'Reilly Sahib is famous from the Deccan to Kashmir," he said. "You can't hope to travel incognito unless you change the color of your hair, and your incredible stature. I'm happy we meet by chance, after all I've heard of you. My name is Frank Janeiro."

Janeiro . . . Portuguese India . . . Goa . . . Prince Mahmed . . . Chance meeting, my eye, O'Reilly thought

"Traveling far, Mr. O'Reilly?" purred Janeiro.

"Pretty far. New York."

"New York?" Again that mirthless chuckle "I fancy you'll have to change trains."

"Go ahead and fancy," said O'Reilly. He looked at Professor Gurda who was

making a nest for himself among his strange luggage on one of the leather-covered berths. The professor had slipped off his shoes and had tucked his feet under him.

The Anglican clergyman was settled in another corner of the compartment, smoking a crooked pipe and reading the Bible.

"Your friend appears to be starting out on an expedition to explore the Sindh Desert," said Janeiro, indicating Gurda.

"I am Professor Gurda, B.A., of His Highness Maharajah Vinayak's High School," said the professor, grinning with all his teeth. "Am unfamiliar with train journeys, having remained static in Zarapore since return from Allahabad University twenty-nine years past. Am therefore prepared for all exigencies."

"I see," Janeiro nodded pleasantly. "And are you going to Delhi, too, Professor?"

"Professor Gurda tells me he's visiting the old folks in Agra," O'Reilly put in quickly.

"Yes, of course." Janeiro's thin, dark lips curled in a curious smile.

O'REILLY dropped the wooden shutter to look out the window. The train was speeding through rice fields aglitter with the cold green light of a million fireflies. He watched the shadows of stiff *tal* palms and the pyramidal domes of a Hindu temple slide by in the hot night.

The corner of his glance, however, was still very much occupied inside the compartment. He could not forget that either the Eurasian or the man with the clerical collar might very possibly have taken a shot at him outside the Maharajah's palace. When he saw the clergyman staring at him strangely over the edge of his Bible, therefore, O'Reilly turned suddenly.

"See anything outa the ordinary about my rear view, padre?" he asked.

The clergyman closed his Bible and smiled. "There is nothing ordinary about you from any view, my friend," he said gently.

"Didn't I see you this afternoon in Zarapore outside the Maharajah's palace?" O'Reilly pursued.

"Quite possibly. If you did, you saw the Reverend Eustace Potts in a somewhat flustered, harried and not at all dignified condition. I was hurrying to keep a last minute appointment. There was so much to do and so little time to do it in before leaving for Delhi."

"I hope you finished your business okay," said O'Reilly pointedly.

"Our work is never done." The Reverend Eustace Potts sighed and puffed several times on his dead pipe. "No doubt you know our mission school in Zarapore. We have been making changes. We— Could I trouble you for a light?"

"Sure thing, Reverend." O'Reilly struck a match. He was careful to hold the flame at some distance from the clergyman and well to his left so that the Reverend Potts would have to lean forward with his left elbow raised in order to light his pipe. O'Reilly wanted a closer look at an intriguing bulge beneath the clerical left armpit.

The locomotive whistled for an approaching station, and the clacking rhythm of the rails began to slow down. O'Reilly suddenly decided to get off and send a wire to his friend the *subadar* of civil police at Zarapore, inquiring as to the background which might cause a Man of God to wear a shoulder holster.

"Thank you . . . very . . . much. . ." said the Reverend Eustace Potts between contented puffs.

"You're welcome as— you're very welcome, padre," said O'Reilly. "Any time."

The train was screeching to a stop. It would be a short stop and the only one before Mogul Junction, where he would have to change trains for Delhi. But he could still get an answer to his wire at Mogul Junction, with the help of the various Hindu gods responsible for the balance between lethargy and industry in Hindu telegraph operators.

O'REILLY opened the door, mumbled something about a breath of air, and waded through the station crowds of water-vendors with their glistening black goatskin bags, luggage coolies, the mêlée of arriving and departing passengers.

At the far end of the train twelve men were holding up long pink curtains so that a *purdah* lady could get into her compartment without being subjected to the gaze of vulgar masculine eyes.

When he found the dim-lighted telegraph office, O'Reilly addressed the following telegram to the *subadar*:

DEAR JOHNNY PLEASE FIND OUT EK DUM WHAT REVEREND EUSTACE POTTS WAS DOING AT ZARAPORE MISSION SCHOOL THAT RATES PACKING A GUN. REPLY MOGUL JUNCTION.

O'REILLY

While he was licking the stamps to affix to the telegraph blank, O'Reilly realized with a cold, sinking feeling that he had neglected to bring the package of ore samples with him—the heavy, compact oblong packet wrapped in green paper and sealed with two great blobs of green wax.

Of course Professor Gurda was in the compartment with it, but the professor making his first train journey in twenty-nine years, was not apt to prove much of a watchdog against a couple of wolves such as Janeiro and the padre might be.

While the halfcaste telegraph operator was fumbling to make change, the station master's whistle sounded. The operator lost count of his paper rupees, square nickel two anna bits, and copper piece; he started counting all over. O'Reilly left him counting and elbowed his way across the platform just as the red cars began to move.

He caught the latch of his compartment as it slid by, jerked the door open, bounded in. He was relieved to see Janeiro and the Reverend Eustace Potts still in their places. Then he noted that the rotund, hen-like Professor Gurda was no longer squatting in his nest of luggage.

Quickly he crossed the compartment to the far corner, opened the lavatory door. Professor Gurda was not there either.

The locomotive whistle screamed. The clicking song of the rails rose to a high-pitched, even purr.

III

THE Reverend Potts seemed lost in reverie as he smoked his pipe. He was no longer reading his Bible. Frank Janeiro had a smug half-smile on his lips as he looked out the window.

"Which of you gents is the magician?" O'Reilly asked. "It's a good trick."

"Trick?" The Reverend Potts appeared puzzled.

"Sure, trick," O'Reilly repeated. "The vanishing professor."

"Ah, yes," droned Janeiro. "Professor Gurda has gone, hasn't he? I hadn't noticed."

"I suppose he just climbed up a rope and disappeared, pulling up the rope after him," O'Reilly said. "I hear Hindus are like that."

"I couldn't say, really," Janeiro said. "I was out stretching my legs on the platform. I don't know where he went."

"You didn't see him go up in a cloud of bright green smoke, did you, padre?"

"As a matter of fact, the professor got down in quite a prosaic and mundane manner," said the Reverend Potts. "I assumed that he had gone after you, Mr. O'Reilly."

"He'll be back shortly, no doubt. He's left his household accoutrements behind." Janeiro chuckled.

"He's got pretty short legs to be running after the train for long," O'Reilly said. "He'll be outa breath by the time we get to the next stop."

Silently cursing himself for having left the professor alone, O'Reilly sat down in his own corner. With all the casualness he could muster, he began rearranging his baggage. As he restacked his bags and his farewell gifts, the cold feeling at the pit of his stomach turned to a hard lump of ice. The Maharajah's ore samples—the green packet with the big green seals—was gone!

THE roar and flashing lights of a passing train occupied the next twenty seconds, giving O'Reilly a welcome respite to light a Burma cheroot and try to organize his thoughts. The disappearance of Professor Gurda and of the ore samples were certainly not disconnected phenomena.

Had the professor carried them off to a safer place, after having his suspicions aroused by Janeiro and the Reverend Potts? Not likely, in view of the apparent naïvete of the Hindu. Was he perhaps himself an agent of the Fifth Column, who had merely departed for greener fields?

Possibly; after all, the professor was supporting his family on some sixty rupees a month—about twenty dollars—and he might conceivably be attracted by the musical crackling of a few thousand-rupee bank notes. Or had both the professor and the ore samples been deftly removed from the picture by Janeiro or the Reverend Potts—or both—who were now merely awaiting a convenient moment to dispose of O'Reilly?

Whatever the answer, there was little O'Reilly could do about it now, except keep awake. These damned Indian trains, with their separate compartments, prevented him from making any search for Professor Gurda in other cars. If only they had civilized trains, with connecting corridors, the way American railways did, he wouldn't be quite so helpless.

As it was he was locked in with Janeiro and the Reverend Potts and his fumbled mission for the Maharajah—until the train stopped again at Mogul Junction. They were due there at midnight. Still an hour to go.

The train wheels clack-clacked over switch frogs, the steel flanges screamed against a curve. In the black distance, the smoky lights of a village wheeled past. O'Reilly puffed furiously on his cheroot, and let the perspiration trickle down his cheeks unnoticed. He would wait until the next station before taking further steps.

When the train finally stopped at Mogul Junction with a great, steamy sigh, O'Reilly noticed with some surprise that both Janeiro and the Reverend Eustace Potts were preparing to get off. With the ore samples and Professor Gurda out of the way, it would seem more natural for the saboteur of the Zarapore manganese fields to continue to Bombay by the same train, instead of changing here for the Punjab Express.

That both men were getting off with O'Reilly could only mean that the job was not yet finished, that O'Reilly was still considered a military objective. So much the better. There was still a chance for O'Reilly to redeem himself.

The door of the compartment opened. Out of the hubbub and confusion of the station crowd, O'Reilly's bearers materialized to reclaim his luggage.

"Better pack this stuff out too, Ali." The redhead pointed out Professor Gurda's abandoned bundles to his white-bearded servant.

"Quite a new role for you, isn't it, O'Reilly Sahib," said Janeiro with a crooked smile, "being nursemaid to an absent-minded Hindu school teacher?"

"I just thought I'd turn his stuff over to the station master, in case he shows up on the next train," O'Reilly answered.

He jumped to the platform—and almost demolished Professor Gurda who at that moment emerged panting from behind a stack of luggage.

THE rotund professor bounced back against a large, bejeweled Parsee lady, caromed off two scowling Pathans, and was just about to collapse seat-foremost on the charcoal stove of an itinerant curry vendor when O'Reilly grabbed his arm and restored his balance.

"Where the hell did you come from?" bellowed O'Reilly. He didn't know whether to hug the professor or kick his pants—if he wore pants instead of a *dhoti*.

"So . . . sorry . . . " panted Professor Gurda.

"Don't ever do that to me again," O'Reilly admonished. "Unless you got reasons. Have you?"

"Was unavoidably detained in intermediate-class compartment," said the professor. "Encountered former student en route to Bombay and was engaging in friendly chit-chat with same when train resumed operation."

"Okay, we'll skip it as long as you've got the whoosis safe."

"Got what safe, please?"

O'Reilly glanced back at the train and saw Janeiro and the Reverend Potts busy with their luggage. "The ore samples," he said.

Professor Gurda's expression was a complete blank.

"The rocks," O'Reilly amplified. "The package of manganese, wrapped in green paper."

The professor shook his head until his high-piled turban trembled violently. "Please pardon puzzlement, O'Reilly Sahib," he said, "but understood green package was confided to you."

"You mean you haven't got it?"

"Not single iota."

O'Reilly's comments were completely unintelligible to Professor Gurda, whose English curriculum at Alahabad University had quite overlooked the rich and picturesque vocabularies of Brooklyn dock hands, Manhattan taxi drivers and army mule-skinners.

"Look, Prof," said O'Reilly when he had run out of cuss words, "you and me have played the Maharajah a dirty trick and I'm ashamed of us. How loud can you yell?"

"Am not noted for loudness, although voice is quite distinct and somewhat shrill. You are wishing demonstration?"

"Not yet, Prof. But listen. There goes Janeiro and the Reverend Potts into the waiting room with their baggage coolies. I want you to follow 'em in and stay with 'em. If they try to leave the station or start any monkey-business with you, I want you to yell."

"What words shall I yell, please?"

"Anything. Police. Murder. Fire. Just yell your head off so I can hear you at the other end of the platform. I got to look in at the telegraph office for a minute."

O'Reilly found a miracle at the telegraph office: The reply to his Zarapore wire had already arrived. It read:

SORRY REVEREND EUSTACE POTTS QUITE UNKNOWN TO LOCAL ECCLESIASTICS OR MISSION SCHOOL. PLEASANT TRIP O'REILLY SAHIB.

GOPALSINGH, SUBADAR

IV

THE Punjab Mail did not come through Mogul Junction until 3:50 a. m., so the passengers from the south had their choice between a long, dreary vigil or a short, restless nap.

Most of them were evidently going to try to sleep. Coming back from the telegraph office—the professor had not yelled—O'Reilly found he had to step over rows of third-class passengers, stretched out on the dusty cement of the platform. And in the first-class waiting room bedding rolls were being opened on hard benches, and Europeans in shirtsleeves were assuming uncomfortable positions in chairs.

A smoky lamp burned dimly on a wall bracket and the hot gloom smelled of kerosene. A *punkah* made of tattered strips of cloth swung lazily back and forth across the ceiling, stirring up warm odors.

Janeiro had installed himself in a chaise longue (rented from the station master for six annas) and was apparently asleep already, his head reposing upon a pneumatic pillow. O'Reilly noted that he had unfastened his collar and tie, but that he had not taken off his shoes.

The Reverend Eustace Potts was sitting on a bench with his back against the wall. His eyes were closed and his hands were clasped across his plump stomach, but O'Reilly was sure he was not asleep. He had made no effort to loosen his clothing, and the bulge under his left armpit was quite distinct.

Professor Gurda had unwound his turban and was squatting in a corner, rubbing his shaven pate when O'Reilly saw him.

"You are still requiring yells, O'Reilly Sahib?" he asked.

"I'll take a raincheck on the yells," O'Reilly replied. "You may as well try and get a little shuteye before the Mail comes along."

Professor Gurda adopted the suggestion with amazing promptness. O'Reilly had himself known fatigue so intense that he could doze sitting up. But he had never seen anyone fall asleep in that position as quickly or as loudly as Professor Gurda.

No doubt the professor's vocal cords were all primed for the yelling that O'Reilly had ordered and were releasing their pent-up sound. At any rate, the succession of guttural gasps, whistles, inhaled gurgles and exhaled moans which emerged from between the professor's buck teeth was a marvel of cacophony.

O'Reilly took off his coat, loosened his collar and belt. He tipped up the stone jug for a swig of the Yogi's palm toddy, and almost immediately opened his mouth to let the smoke escape. When he had caught his breath, he sprawled on the vacant end of a bench from where he could watch the door. He had no intention of sleeping, and was glad to discover that the toddy was an aid to wakefulness. A few drops would probably give insomnia to a week-old corpse.

THE assistant station master came in to turn down the smelly lamp. When he left the waiting room, the wick sputtered, the flame popped and expired. Little by little the sounds on the platform died away, until the dark silence was marred only by the creaking of the *punkah* and the snoring of Professor Gurda.

O'Reilly fought off drowsiness. The third time he found himself nodding, he was just about to reach for the jug when he felt his nerves go suddenly tense. Someone was moving in the room. He sat up very straight, straining his eyes, but could make out nothing in the darkness. Then he heard a sharp metallic sound, like the catch of a valise springing open. His gaze turned in the direction of the sound. He saw a shadow straighten up, glide silently toward the gray oblong that was the door.

For an instant a plump silhouette was stamped against the dim light from outside. O'Reilly recognized the Reverend Eustace Potts.

At once O'Reilly was on his feet. He waited a few seconds, then stealthily crossed the room. He paused at the chaise longue where Janeiro slept. He listened. The Eurasian was breathing evenly. As he went out the door, O'Reilly could still hear Professor Gurda's discordant organ notes.

The Reverend Potts was already at the far end of the platform, hurrying into the gloom. O'Reilly stepped over a knot of sleeping Hindus and set off in long-legged pursuit.

From beyond the station, O'Reilly caught sight of the self-styled missionary walking rapidly behind the row of little square bungalows where the railway employes lived. The houses were very white under the blazing stars. Behind each one, on raised cement floors, people were sleeping beneath tents of mosquito netting. Here and there a *punkah* swung from a gallows-like frame over the outdoor sleepers.

The Reverend Potts was a good hundred yards ahead, a dark phantom gliding past the railway bungalows moving toward the native village. The native part of Mogul Junction consisted of only a few straggling streets of lopsided mud-and-bamboo huts with roofs of thatch or tile, so O'Reilly was not worried when he lost sight of his quarry at the first turn.

He continued down the dusty lane until he came to an open space on the other side, where cakes of cowdung had been stacked to dry. He stopped to listen. There was no sound but the mournful laughter of jackals somewhere on the baked plain far beyond the dark clump of palms.

O'Reilly turned into the next street without catching sight of Eustace Potts. He did see, however, a crack of light shining between the solid wooden shutters of a hut just a few steps ahead. He approached carefully, brought one eye close to the narrow opening. Then he smiled to himself.

INSIDE the bare, mud-plastered room, sat two men. One was the man who called himself Reverend Eustace Potts. The other was a thin, red-faced, fish-eyed individual whom O'Reilly recognized as Henry Fayne, the mineralogist from Delhi.

On a table between them burned a native lamp—a wick floating in an earthenware bowl of cocoanut oil. Also on the table—and O'Reilly breathed a deep sigh of relief—was an oblong green package bearing two large blobs of green sealing wax. The Reverend Potts kept the fingers of one hand tightly clasped about the

package as he spoke to Fayne. His voice was low-pitched and came to O'Reilly only as an unintelligible rumble. Fayne said little, although he nodded occasionally.

O'Reilly congratulated himself. He had not only recovered, practically, the missing ore samples, but he had established the criminal complicity of Henry Fayne of Delhi, unearthed his Zarapore lieutenant, and in all likelihood put his finger on the murderer of Dr. Khopri. What's more, he had caught them with the goods. He—

Fayne's lips moved. He and the Reverend Potts turned their heads abruptly toward the window. O'Reilly knew they could not see him, but it was uncomfortable to feel them staring in his direction. The Reverend Potts quickly unbuttoned his clerical jacket, slipped his right hand toward his left armpit. Fayne reached over to pinch out the floating wick. The room went dark.

O'Reilly dropped to his haunches. His hand moved to his hip, seeking the comfortable touch of steel. It was not cold steel—nothing was cold in India at this time of year—but it was comforting, nevertheless. His fingers curled tightly about the butt of his .45.

Keeping his head below the level of the sill, he backed slowly away from the window. He wanted to reach the corner of the hut where he could still command an exit from the window and yet watch the door if the two men tried to escape that way. Then, with brutal abruptness, the universe came roaring down about his ears.

O'Reilly did not know what hit him. His fleeting impression was that the sky had fallen on him from the rear, striking the back of his skull with a great, crunching smash. There was a blaze of pain, a brief, whirling flash of giddy light. He felt himself drawn into a vortex of dizzy darkness, a void in which nothing existed.

HE was out for only a few seconds, he thought, because as he fought his way back to dazed consciousness, he was aware of things going on around him. He was sure he heard running footsteps, but when he tried to follow, his muscles disobeyed.

He thought, too, that he heard the roar of a passing train, the shriek of a locomotive whistle, the bark of a pistol, the slamming of a door—but he couldn't be sure. Perhaps they were just part of the confused noises drumming in his ears. Time and space seemed completely scrambled, and he couldn't quite find his own place in the chaos.

With great effort, he finally raised himself to one knee. He groped along the ground and touched his gun; that was a relief. He stood up. A sick wave of dizziness swept over him, and he leaned against he wall of the hut. He was aware of a throbbing welt growing on the back of his head He breathed deeply and found the world settling down to its old solidity beneath his feet. He began to walk.

He made he circuit of the hut without meeting anyone. He came back to the door. It was locked. There would be nobody inside, of course. Fayne and the padre had been frightened away. And yet it seemed impossible that either of them should have had time to sneak around behind him and lay him out cold. Perhaps it was someone who had followed him from the station: Janeiro, perhaps; or Professor Gurda. Maybe he'd better have a look inside, anyhow.

He struck a match to examine the door lock. He was so startled by what the flame revealed that he dropped the match. It sizzled out in a puddle of crimson. There was blood seeping out from under the door.

O'Reilly stepped back, then flung his shoulder against the wooden panel. Painful fireworks went off inside his head. He stepped back again. The panel was flimsy and the lock primitive. He tried again. There was a splintering crash. The door shuddered inward.

O'Reilly stepped aside, poked his gun past the jamb.

"Come outa there!" he ordered.

There was no answer. Across the street a shutter opened and a woman called something in Hindustani. A few houses further on, a light appeared. An old man came out carrying a lantern.

"Get away with that light!" O'Reilly commanded. "*Chalao!* Scram!"

The old man stopped in his tracks.

O'Reilly cautiously ventured inside the hut. At the third step his foot brushed something heavy but yielding. He changed his course, hugged the wall, feeling his way along until he was opposite the door. Satisfied that his adversaries, at least the abled-bodied ones, had gone, he shouted:

"You can bring that lantern now. *Chiragh lao.*"

The old man came as far as the door, then grunted, set down the lantern in a hurry, and backed away in awe.

THE glow illuminated a man lying on the floor in a pool of blood. His face was turned toward O'Reilly, and the eyes were closed. It was the Reverend Eustace Potts.

O'Reilly walked quickly to the motionless figure. Near the padre's outstretched hand was his Bible. Between him and the table was the torn green paper which had wrapped the Maharajah's manganese samples.

O'Reilly bent over to peer into the pale face. He felt the shoulder holster; it was empty. He explored the man's sticky shirt for a heartbeat.

The Reverend Eustace Potts' eyelids fluttered open. He stared dully at O'Reilly. His lips moved faintly, but no words came. Then his fingers moved. He was trying to point to something, something on his person.

"Sure, I know you're hurt, Reverend," O'Reilly said. "It's probably your own damned fault, but I'll see what I can do for you. Which one of those mugs shot you?"

The fingers still moved. To O'Reilly they seemed to be pointing to the pocket of the clerical tunic.

The redhead plunged his big fist into the pocket, brought ought half a dozen polished gray discs. He stared at them, a puzzled frown wrinkling his forehead. They looked like he buffalo-horn poker chips that the minister of education had given him. What the devil?

He stared at the Reverend Potts, whose pain-wracked eyes were full of questions as they held his gaze. O'Reilly looked at the horn discs again. Then he looked at the Bible on the floor, and the torn green paper. An expansive grin bloomed suddenly on his rugged face. He nodded violently that he understood.

"I get it, Reverend," he said. "Nice work."

A shadow of a smile flickered in the clergyman's eyes. He sighed. His lids closed.

O'REILLY gathered up the wounded man in his arms, strode to the door. A crowd of Indians had gathered in the narrow street watching in silence.

"Is there a railway doctor in this dump?" O'Reilly demanded. "Can one of you lead me to a doctor? *Hakim hai?*"

A naked brown boy stepped forward. "*Hakim-ka-ghar idhar hai.*"

"Sahib," he said, starting off for the colony of railway bungalows.

O'Reilly followed. The Reverend Eustace Potts was no featherweight and the lump on the back of O'Reilly's head gave off sparks and steam at every jolting step, but he managed to keep up with the boy, until they reached the doctor's bungalow.

The railway doctor was a white-haired old man, blinded by sleep, naked except for a pair of shorts and a flannel cummerbund. He came shuffling out to his veranda in response to O'Reilly's bellowing.

"What in the name of Brahma is going on?" he grumbled sleepily. "Another derailment? Or is Mrs. Sousa having premature pains? Or— Good lord, Harrison! Bring him inside. Quickly."

The doctor had finally got his eyes open wide enough to see the limp and bloody figure in O'Reilly's arms, and instantly he was thoroughly awake. He led the way into the house, calling for lights, hot water, and instruments.

As he bent over the wounded man, cutting away his clothing, he asked: "What the ruddy dickens is Harrison doing in Mogul Junction?"

"The man's name is the Reverend Eustace Potts," said O'Reilly.

"Yes, yes, I know." The doctor smiled tolerantly as he worked. "You C. I. D. men like to be ruddy mysterious, don't you? But don't forget I've been in India fifty years, and I know every secret agent between Bengal and the Western Ghats. I've known Harrison for twenty years. He can't fool me by dressing up like a ruddy vicar."

"Is he hurt bad, Doc?"

"He'll have a belly ache for a few weeks," the doctor said. "Lucky he's got plenty of paunch to spare, so he won't miss the few inches of blubber that carried away. Of course I've got to be careful about digging out these bits of undershirt the bullet has planted here and there . . . Hello, Harrison. Does that hurt?"

The sting of antiseptic and the bite of the doctor's probe had penetrated the pseudo-clergyman's coma. He opened his eyes.

"I don't suppose there's any use of my asking you to introduce me to your friend here, Harrison," the doctor went on, "because you'll only tell me he's the Viceroy himself traveling incognito. He's a C. I. D. agent, of course."

The man who called himself Eustace Potts smiled wanly. "He is—for tonight," he whispered.

"That's a hint for me to get on with the job," said O'Reilly. "I'll be seeing you."

V

LONG before he reached the waiting room again, O'Reilly knew that Professor Gurda was still there and enjoying undisturbed slumber. No other human could produce the hair-raising dissonances that resounded on the hot night.

He hurried to the bench under which he had left his baggage and held his breath as he looked through his parcels for the box of Jaipur enamel which had contained the minister of education's poker chips.

There it was, heaven be praised. It was much heavier than it had been originally; strange he hadn't noticed that before. He moved toward the door and

opened the box. Yes, there was the collection or rocks and clods that meant so much to the Maharajah and perhaps to Britain's war. Smart guys, these boys of the Criminal Investigation Department.

O'Reilly wondered if Mr. Harrison, alias Eustace Potts, expected him to do anything further about Janeiro and Fayne. Janeiro, of course, was gone from the waiting room; it was undoubtedly he who had smacked O'Reilly from the rear, just as it was Fayne who had shot Harrison-Potts on discovering a Bible in place of the ore samples.

O'Reilly had no authority to act, but he felt the least he could do would be to give justice a gentle nudge. He went to look up the station master.

He was surprised to find the station master's office locked and the light out. He could have sworn that when he passed a moment before the office had been open. He was still rattling the door when the tail of his glance picked up three spectral figures moving across the tracks toward the freight yards, perhaps a hundred yards away. Something about the way the specters moved told him that they were wearing white European trousers, not Hindu *dhotis*. Immediately he started in cautious pursuit.

He remained within the protecting shadow of the station walls until he saw the three figures disappear behind a line of goods vans on a siding. Then he drew his gun and sprinted.

WHEN he reached the line of cars, he again slowed to a stealthy pace. He climbed silently over the couplings between two cars and looked in both directions.

Again he saw the three specters. They were only fifty yards from him now—close enough for him to recognize them. Janeiro and Fayne were marching the station master before them at the point of Fayne's gun, marching him toward the next track where a handcar stood.

"That's all, Fayne. Up with your hands, Janeiro!" O'Reilly bellowed suddenly.

Fayne whirled and fired twice. The station master started to run, stumbled, and fell flat on his face. O'Reilly ducked back between the cars, his .45 thundering.

Fayne and Janeiro started pushing the handcar down the track. O'Reilly fired again. He could hear the bullet clang against steel and ricochet whining into the night.

The motor on the handcar wheezed, coughed, and popped into action. Janeiro and Fayne jumped aboard as the car began to gain momentum.

O'Reilly leaped from between the freight cars, took aim, squeezed the trigger, then started running. Both Janeiro and Fayne were shooting at him now. The orange flashes of their guns made a flickering pattern with the intermittent blue flame of the motor exhaust.

O'Reilly raised his arm, drew careful bead to make the last shots count. Then his finger froze on the trigger. His arm fell, and his mouth opened. He could not have explained why he wanted to yell, and he didn't have to explain, because no sounds came from his parted lips.

The men on the handcar probably wouldn't have heard him anyhow. The motor was making too much noise—so much noise that they didn't hear the switch engine come charging around the corner of the freight shed on the same track. Facing the rear to exchange shots with O'Reilly, they had their backs to the onrushing locomotive when it struck the handcar.

The crash and clatter of rending metal dinned on O'Reilly's ears. The handcar seemed to explode, flinging pieces in all directions, pieces of wood and steel, of Eurasian and mineralogist, of cowcatcher and gasoline motor.

When the switch engine came to a stop and O'Reilly and the station master ran to where the handcar had been, there wasn't quite enough of Fayne and Janeiro left for the railway doctor to work on.

THE Punjab Mail, luckily, was a few minutes late, so O'Reilly had time to get Professor Gurda awake and ready for loading. They had a compartment to themselves, so O'Reilly could continue his detailed history of the lump on the back of his head.

"So you can see that the guys in Delhi weren't quite as dumb as His Highness thought, since they had a C. I. D. dick in Zarapore, watching the whole show," he said.

He ran a hand through his red hair.

"And when this dick in padre's rig gets left alone at that last station where you and me and Janeiro get off, he figures we're too careless with the ore samples and he'll help out by making 'em harder to steal. So he dumps the rocks into that box where the poker chips were, and he wraps the green paper around his Bible, which was about the same size as the other package.

"He knows where this bird Fayne is hiding in Mogul Junction, so he goes around with the package, probably expecting Fayne to make some crack which would show whether there was a Nazi in the rock pile, or just the Maharajah's half-brother Mahmed. All Fayne did, though, was to say something to get the padre to turn his head while he puts out the light and plugs him in the stomach.

"Of course, the padre must have spotted me for a cop right away and a New York cop at that, so he knew he wouldn't have to draw diagrams. He knew a New York cop would be following him like a bird dog, and if anything happened, why it'd be a cinch I'd get the signals on the poker chips right away.

"And the chips wouldn't mean a thing to anybody else but me. It's funny how cops sort of feel a thing, from one cop to the other, without saying a word. Sixth Avenue sense, we call it in Manhattan.

"The padre'll probably be tickled to death when he comes to tomorrow and finds out that those two yeggs accidentally committed suicide trying to make a getaway. And did they commit it. You couldn't have done a better job with a meat ax."

The roar of the Punjab Mail crossing a bridge covered O'Reilly's voice. The first gleam of dawn lay upon the river, making the girders of the bridge seem very black as they leaped past the car window. On the far bank the minarets of a mosque raised thin dark fingers against the paling sky, like an admonition for silence. O'Reilly stopped talking.

But Professor Gurda snored.

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Jeopardy's Jewel

He understood at last on the white beach there at Guaymas, facing leveled rifles in the early sunrise

By H. Bedford-Jones

Author of "Sinister Sapphire," "The Angry Amethyst," etc.

This evasive, sinister beauty whose face is in the heart of every priceless gem, pays her fifth visit to Shipman's laboratory. With her she brings a shimmering opal—and a prophecy of one last soul-shattering conflict

THE detective for the jewel insurance people was cool, efficient, callous. He sat in the office of Shipman's gem laboratory—quite without emotion—described the strange case of the young woman who had lost herself.

"She's been seen here, in this state, in this city," he went on. "Because of her strange mania for jewels, she may turn up at any of the big shops, or she may come here to your place. We'll run her down, of course, and shall count upon your help."

Shipman and his assistant, Korvo, assented with courteous interest.

Inwardly the tall, hawk-faced Shipman was suffering a chaos of emotions; this final blow had shocked him deeply. Might come here? She had already been here four times, changing the course of his whole thought and action and life.

And now he must lie about it to the insurance people: he, Luke Shipman, one of the foremost experts in precious stones, must lie if he would protect her.

"This young woman disappeared three months ago from Seattle, where she was attending college," went on the dispassionate voice. "She's been reported in various cities, always in connection with jewel thefts; she must have a pretty swell collection by now."

"Her background?" suggested Korvo, who appreciated the suffering of his chief. "Her name, family and so forth?"

The detective went over his notes. To Shipman, the torture was growing intolerable. Despite everything, he had believed in this girl, trusted her, helped her; heaven help him, he was in love with her! Yet this information hurt more than anything else.

"Marie Wilson, aged twenty-two. Of excellent family, her father dead, her mother remarried. She does not lack money, having her own inheritance. Here's a photograph."

He offered it.

Shipman forced himself to look at it; his heart chilled. It was her likeness; this was the girl who had sat here in this very office. And he must lie about it.

"Now, we don't want the police in it; we don't want her arrested, if we can avoid it," said the detective. "Apparently it's a case of mania, of mental unbalance; she's screwy on no other subject, in no other way.

"She steals stones and hoards 'em. My business is to get 'em back. Her family will make good every loss. There's to be no prosecution.

"But, mind you, Lord knows what may happen with such a mental case! A woman of the very highest character, if deranged on the subject of jewels, may go to any length."

Shipman lied, Korvo lied; the detective presently took his leave, humming a gay tune. With him, it was just another case to be run down and closed.

IN THE office of this laboratory, whose brains and machines served the jewel trade of the entire country, where every last secret of precious stones was laid bare by the latest scientific research, the two men sat and looked at each other.

"Chief, I know how you feel," said Korvo gently. His dark, powerful features held a great compassion. "Now, this backs up my theory; don't feel down in the mouth. We can get in touch with this girl; at least, she'll be coming here. We're the only ones who can help her."

Shipman groaned. "If your theory is right, she's possessed by a devil!"

"Yes; a devil who's mad about jewels. And that's why we can help. I believe we can rid her of this devil. I know the way. I've been reading up; another two or three days, and I'll be ready to handle the case.

"Remember, her only hope is in us. Let the medicos get hold of her, and she's lost. They'd never believe in this theory; they'd call her insane.

"And she's not insane. So cheer up, chief. Need me this afternoon?"

"No."

"Then I'll run downtown; it's on her case, too. There's one thing I need, when we do take her in hand, and I know where to find it."

The door closed behind him. Alone, Shipman gloomily poured himself a drink; he needed it. Believe in devils—of course the doctors wouldn't! Who would?

In the effort to put it all out of his mind, he flung himself into work. The laboratory specialized in testing and treating stones, in mounting them, cutting them, inventing new uses for them, and in teaching all these things to the trade.

Shipman was dictating furiously, when the interphone buzzed. The receptionist in the outer office spoke.

"That young lady, Mr. Shipman. Miss Crews."

For an instant, Shipman's heart stood still. Then he found voice.

"Send her in at once."

She walked in, as the stenographer departed. She stood inside the door, regarding him coolly, distantly, almost with hostility. But she was very lovely: slim, proud, darkly capable.

"I'm glad you came!" Shipman started up, as she came to the desk. "So you're Marie Wilson; that's your real name!"

She halted; angry suspicion flamed in her eyes.

"How do you know that?"

"A detective was here; you're being sought everywhere," Shipman said rapidly. "We took care of it, but you're in frightful danger of being picked up. Won't you put yourself in my hands? Won't you trust me, let me—"

"I don't care to discuss it at all," she broke in, to his shocked amazement. No doubt of her hostility now. "I came here because I had to come, and I'll come again; they can't catch me. You know the worst about me, and you'll not give me away or trap me."

"No," said Shipman in a low voice. "No. You know you can trust me. But you're not yourself today; you're—"

"I am myself," she interrupted again, almost with disdain. "I came to ask you to put a stone in the machine for me. It's glorious, glorious! I can't wait to see it, to hear what it says to me!"

"Let me have it," said Shipman quietly.

AS SHE searched in her bag, he forced himself to see her objectively, without sentiment. He knew the truth now; her words had confirmed the worst suspicions.

She was two persons, and this was the other person today: the devil, the elemental, as Korvo called it; the being that had seized upon her, driving her despite herself with a lust for jewels.

Hitherto, Shipman had seen her fighting against this *alter ego;* but today the girl he knew was gone, and here was a hard, cold, passionless being moved only by the overpowering greed for the gems she loved.

Watching her, in this moment, Shipman resolved to play the game; and if possible, to save her from herself, or from her other self, this very day.

He put no faith whatever in Korvo's rather vague promises. Korvo's belief that she was possessed by a devil—quite literally—was to him ridiculous.

He did not know what to think, what to believe. This attitude of hostility on her part, even while she begged a favor, was beyond understanding.

"There!" From her handbag she extracted a chamois pouch, loosened its draw-strings, and from it produced an unset stone of some size: it was as large as his thumb.

"I suppose you can see at a glance why it interests me? And," she added with astonishing malice, "don't you wish it were yours?"

Shipman gave her a glance. "No. A man whose life work lies among gems must learn at the outset not to covet—not even to own any, in fact unless he's a millionaire; and I'm not. Yes, I see why it interests you; it would interest anyone."

The stone was an irregular but beautiful cabochon; yet it had never been cut or even polished. It was one of those milky opals found from Mexico to Montana, sometimes within the matrix where the silica and water have been compressed; this was just as it had come from the matrix, one side alive with green, the other with red iridescence.

Further, Shipman knew this particular stone. He had seen it in a museum in another city, when he was studying such opals; it was on the list of stolen gems shown him by the insurance detective. This girl had stolen it.

But she had not been able to resist the temptation to see its wonders revealed by the polyandroscope, that machine which Shipman himself had invented.

"Come along," he said quietly, and turned to the door. He knew that the chamois pouch in her handbag must hold all these precious stones which she had stolen; his clear duty was to summon the detective here and now. But he could not.

TOGETHER they went into the outer office. Korvo was not back yet. Shipman ushered her into the examination room; last time she had been here, she had made a frantic effort to save herself, as she expressed it. Now she was a totally different person.

The little room, with its three chairs and the intricate machinery on the stand, closed out the world. Marie Wilson—he knew her real name, now— took one of the chairs, put her wrap and her bag on the center one, and lighted a cigarette.

Shipman made no attempt to explain how the iridescent coloring of the stone was due to the cracks in the original jelly-like substance, which now refracted the light so variously. He saw she wanted no information; she wanted her curiosity, her avid desire, satisfied.

He was curious, too; and as he placed the opal in the central clamp of the machine, he wondered why it had made so tremendous an appeal to her.

He switched off the room lights and took the unoccupied chair. At the heart of the machine was now visible a needle of light, which grew stronger and more intense.

Once again, Shipman wondered whether the peculiar visions this girl seemed to evoke from certain stones were not pure hypnosis, induced by this light. A neat explanation, could he accept it; but he and Korvo knew better.

"The effect of the polarized light on the opal," said Shipman, breaking the silence, "and also of the ultra-violet and red rays, should be marvelous. A lucky stone, the opal."

"I thought it was unlucky," came her voice, still hostile. He laughed softly.

"No, no. Because one of Scott's novels started that notion, it's not necessarily true. In fact, it's been long ago exploded, and opals are now highly favored in England. In ancient times the opal was held sacred to truth; even today, the occult East believes that it clears the brain, and that its touch is lucky.

"There! Now it's coming up."

Often as he had seen the workings of this machine, its results were ever new to him. The great hollow glass ball above the stone, the curved silver reflector overhead, were suffused with a lovely dancing play of colors.

Gradually, within that sphere, grew the image of the stone itself, enormously enlarged, but as yet vague in outline.

But the color! It was a riot of flashing reds and greens shot through with living sunlight, continually changing as the opal was slowly turned. The little room was lighted almost brilliantly with this prismatic sheen.

Stealing a glance at the girl, Shipman saw that she was utterly absorbed, fiercely intent upon that mass of glowing iridescence. He caught a startled dilation of her eyes, and looked to see the cause.

The glory of light in the glass ball rippled and deepened, became dotted with the yellow smoky glow of many lanterns. Shipman saw them plainly as lanterns; bluish tobacco smoke twisted and twined in them . . .

VOICES rose in a steady roar of sound, and the duller clink of coins and chips. Men became visible, tables for gambling, heavily crowded; voices of women lifted in shriller accents. A drunken voice rose piercingly above the confusion:

"H'ray! H'ray for Frisco! H'ray for New Year's day! H'ray for the year 1852!"

A roar of laughter went up. "He's still celebrating! Thinks it's last night still!"

Faces began to grow clear. Between the tables and the bar moved a strolling guitar player, a Mexican. He came up to a man who leaned against a pillar, smoking; a man with bold eyes and aquiline nose—striking, vibrant, keenly alive—and spoke to him softly.

"Don Gaston, she will be waiting in ten minutes, at your office."

"At my office? *Diable!*" The other started. "But it's night. No one is there; the office is closed."

"All the more reason for you to be there and open it." With a smile and a strum of chords, the Mexican moved away. Don Gaston was still staring after him when another man came up with a hearty greeting and a clap on the shoulder.

"Ha, Count Raousset! Not tempting the goddess this evening?"

Here was Patrice Dillon, the handsome, energetic French consul in San Francisco, and Raousset turned to him with suppressed eagerness.

"No, I'm not gambling. I heard that a ship from the south arrived today."

Dillon glanced around, and spoke in low, rapid French.

"Yes. Why didn't you come to my office?"

"I didn't get back from Sacramento until this evening."

"Well, you've run freight up to the mines for the last time," said Dillon. "The reply is here from Mexico City; everything is assured. Our men will pay over their money at once, on the strength of this. You'll have five hundred men in a week's time."

Raousset's face lit up; it was the face of a dreamer, a poet, a captain of adventure; such a face as a young Cortez might have had before age embittered him. He started to speak, but Dillon checked him.

"Not here. Come to my office at eleven tomorrow. Here's a man you must meet; he got in by today's boat. Dangerous . . . "

A suave, pleasant, smiling Mexican, Don Pedro Yorba. Dillon introduced the two of them, the three chatted amiably. Don Pedro was here, it seemed, to settle some land disputes with the United States, regarding the vast California ranches.

Raousset found him affable and a good talker; he wore a glorious opal ring, an enormous stone which he himself had found, he said, while crossing the desert some years ago.

As quickly as possible, Raousset made his excuses and hurried out of the Lucky Strike gambling hall. Here, under the stars, he could give free rein to his wild exultation.

He had soldiered, colonized, adventured; he had written novels, had managed a newspaper; now he had come to California as one among uncounted thousands—but the only one destined to become a king!

Thus he told himself as he hastened through the dark, sandy, filthy streets to the upstairs loft that he dignified by title of office.

The guarantees here, the money subscribed, Mexico welcoming him! All in a moment, everything had come true—dreams, plans, ambitions. That steamer from the south had brought everything this day. Raousset blew a kiss to the lights of the ships in the bay. He was ecstatic, overjoyed, transfigured; he was, actually, no longer the same man.

MOUNTING the stairs to his office, he hastily got a lamp alight, closed the door of the back room where he lived and slept, and hurriedly brushed up the room a bit. That she should come here was astonishing; but then, the Doña Ynez did as she pleased and was a law unto herself.

A refugee from Mexico, she had opened a restaurant for Latin-Americans and was making money fast. In this amazing melting pot of all nations, drawn by the mad lust for gold, it was work or starve; noblemen, princes, scions of wealth and genius, worked with their bare hands.

Was not Count Raousset, of the Bourbon line, a lighterman plying a freight boat to Sacramento?

She came, a light swift foot upon the stairs. Smiling, she entered and he bowed over her hand with formal phrases. She was slender, dark, a Spanish mantilla about her head, a cloak enveloping her graceful figure. Her lustrous eyes widened upon him, as she laughed.

"You greet me formally, Don Gaston? What courtesy!"

"I greet you as a queen," he said, with dignity, and placed a chair for her.

"*Gracias!*" She laughed again, and seated herself. "I needed to see you tonight; I have had word that I may be allowed to return to Mexico, that the government has decided to restore my estates. And you have spoken of going there—"

"All that is of small importance now." He brushed aside her words. Despite his French ways and gestures, there was a certain simplicity about him, a direct appeal; one felt the charm that never failed him. "You shall have greater estates than your family ever owned; jewels, servants, wealth, power!"

She leaned forward, puzzled, intent. This new air of self-assurance, of command, became him well.

"Something has happened, Gaston?"

"Everything has happened!" He laughed suddenly, cast off formality, seized her hand and kissed it. "Now I can speak freely; now I can tell you everything. I go to Mexico by the next ship. You shall come; then you'll marry no laboring man, but a child of destiny!"

"Tell me," she exclaimed. "And," she added shrewdly, "only facts, Gaston. No dreams."

Thanks to the aid of Dillon, Count Raousset had only facts to tell.

HE POINTED out to her how the influx of French in California had met with trouble. They, the Chinese, the Latin-Americans, had been driven from the gold fields by those of American birth; they were ready for anything. And he had a project to offer them.

It was no dream, but a solid future. He had been a staff officer in Algeria; he knew his business. Mexico had now agreed to let him head a large number of French "colonists" who would come from California.

He would go to Mexico City, sign the necessary papers, get the required—and promised—commission, then go back and meet his first arrivals at Guaymas.

They would be armed, of course, for protection against the Apaches. They were to colonize the fertile valleys of Sonora.

"You see?" he concluded. "I, Dillon, one or two others—we alone know the truth. Once established, we seize Guaymas and the rest of the Sonora coast; it is ours, the silver and gold mines are ours. More Frenchmen flood in. You shall be queen of Sonora!"

She caught her breath. He was in sober earnest; and his dream was possible.

"And you, Gaston—a king?"

He nodded. "It's not fantastic. Look at the Mormons in Utah; their empire is independent of the United States. There is talk of California becoming independent, as Texas was. A king has established himself on the islands in Lake Michigan; they say he has thousands of followers and is actually a crowned king. So why not in Sonora?"

Why not, indeed? Mexican rule was slack; a thousand determined Frenchmen could seize the province. American capital was interested in the scheme. The ultimate aim was still a deep secret. Once established, the new kingdom would be recognized by France. The United States was too torn by slavery troubles to interfere.

It was a glittering, shimmering prospect. As he talked, Count Raousset thought of the opal he had seen on Don Pedro's hand; yes, his plan was glorious and iridescent as that opal.

The girl kindled to the possibility. "But be careful, Gaston!" she warned him, when they had discussed the future and resolved to seek Mexico together. "Be careful! San Francisco is full of Mexican spies, they say. All sorts of plans are afoot here, plots and conspiracies and intrigues; some want to seize Lower California, others talk of Nicaragua. Spies have been planted here to send word of such things to Mexico. Be careful!"

Raousset gravely assured her that not six people knew the secret—all of it. Then, donning hat and coat, he escorted her to her own place; it was close by. And, if they parted upon a kiss, only the stars saw.

With morning, every dream came true in Patrice Dillon's office; the documents, the guarantees, the money. But, before Raousset left, Dillon cautioned him.

"Be careful of one person; watch the fellow I introduced you to last night."

"Don Pedro Yorba?"

"Precisely. He's a Mexican agent, if I know anything; and that means spy work!"

Raousset laughed, promised caution, and with a twirl of his moustache went his way, walking on air if ever a man did. He had already sold his boat and a few cattle he had picked up as a speculation, and was in funds; the future was golden.

That night, as he stood watching a roulette table in the Lucky Strike, Raousset found Don Pedro at his elbow. They fell into talk; they went to the bar and drank; they went to Raousset's office and there, over cigars and a bottle of wine, they talked late and made an engagement for the morrow.

Raousset was wary, and knew precisely what he was doing. He liked Don Pedro, however, finding him a man much like himself: soldier, adventurer, gay blade, even a dreamer. Don Pedro might well be a spy, but he was possessed of a high sense of honor and a tremendous Spanish pride, which Raousset appreciated.

In fact, the two men drew close together during the succeeding days. They were drawn by a mutual liking and admiration. So far as his colonizing schemes went, Raousset could talk openly of them, up to a certain point, and did; they were no secret.

He took Don Pedro up to Sacramento to see the gold diggings, discussed colonization and Apache fighting with him, and in short did everything except trust him.

WHEN he went to Monterey, however, only Dillon accompanied him. They were gone a week—for Raousset a week of greater import than it seemed. At Monterey they met three of the six persons who knew the entire secret.

Financial and legal matters were settled, transportation to Guaymas from San Francisco, arms and munitions—a score of details regarding the practical side of the expedition were set in order.

Raousset was delighted with the business-like form everything had taken. And his backers were delighted with him; his magnetism, his power of attracting men, was equalled only by his cool common sense and capability.

So he and Dillon rode back to San Francisco. They got into the city late at night, and went to the Lucky Strike for a bite to eat and a drink, and a whirl of the dice; Dillon was ever a man for the tables, though Raousset was not.

Amid the familiar roaring crowd, the

haze of tobacco smoke, and the click of chips and coins, the two separated. Raousset grasped at food and gulped his wine, being weary and hungry. A laugh, a strumming twang of chords, and the Mexican guitar player at his elbow. He bit at a cigar and nodded amiably to the man, who was paid by the house.

"Well, Tomas? I just got back; it is too late to see her. She is well?"

"Oh, quite well, *señor,* quite well! But she has gone away, across the bay."

"Eh?" Raousset looked at the man, who was a malignant, scarred rascal, working during the day as a dishwasher in the restaurant of Doña Ynez. "Gone where?"

The Mexican strummed a note or two, winked and grinned.

"To the Rancho de las Rosas, the hacienda of Señor Vaca; it is a grand *baile,* a dance. She will be back tomorrow. But when the swallows go away, the swifts take their nests, eh?"

Raousset's eyes sharpened. He knew what a rogue this fellow was; he caught the undertone of significance in the drawling peon voice. He felt in his pocket, produced a coin and placed it in the man's hand.

"Well?"

"Ah, caballero, I kiss your hands and feet!" The other pouched the coin, strummed a chord, and grinned again. "The excellent Don Pedro went also, *señor. Adios!*

He moved away gracefully, his lilting voice breaking into song, leaving Raousset stricken and agape. Don Pedro Yorba! . . *"Diable!"* he exclaimed. And, puffing at his cigar, he left the place and sought his dark, chill office; jealousy seethed and burst into flame in his soul. He had not discussed Ynez with Don Pedro, but now he intended to discuss Don Pedro with her.

HE DID it, the following afternoon. Haggard and impetuous, he picked her up and took her in a hired carriage, out over the sandy hills and on to the beach, and had the thing out. When Ynez, at last, divined the cause of his trouble and suffering, she burst into a trill of silvern laughter and hugged his arm.

"Gaston! I laugh at your imagination, and I grieve for your needless pain." She pouted deliciously, concern in her eyes denying the laughter in her voice. "In two words, let me put your anger to rest. I love you; I don't love him! Oh, he is a great caballero; he is handsome, he is wealthy—but what is he to you?"

"He's in love with you, then?"

"Not particularly. He amuses himself with me," she replied, maliciously. "And privately I amuse myself with him, he is such a fool! He thinks that I do not know he has a wife and three children in Guadalajara."

An angry word escaped Raousset. "What? And he dares to approach you?"

"Tut, tut!" She laughed again, her hand warm in his. "My dear, it's just his way; let him be, and remain satisfied. Are you not my divinity? Shall we not be in Mexico together? Then forget poor Don Pedro. I can't prevent his hanging around me, and after all he's rather nice to talk with when you're gone."

"I shan't be gone again," said Raousset, and kissed her.

"And now tell me everything," she urged gayly. "I have news for you, too; I've sold the restaurant, and shall turn it over tomorrow. Then I'm free, until the next steamer that goes to Guaymas. Your steamer, Gaston!"

She chattered of her affairs, drifted around to his, and sat enthralled while he told her what had happened at Monterey. Raousset sketched every detail for her, showed her how nothing was being left to chance; his tremendous relief, his vast happiness, filled his heart to bursting.

In this moment of her love, he could have forgiven the whole world all its injuries; he could almost have forgiven Don Pedro his lust—almost, but not quite.

It was not until they were nearly back to the city, with the sun westering, that he noticed the chain around her neck. At his inquiry, her slender fingers went to the gold chain, her eyes went to his face, her lips parted breathlessly.

"Promise me you'll not be angry?"

"Why the devil should I be angry?" he said, laughing.

"But promise; your word of honor."

"Certainly!" All trouble or suspicion was far from his mind. He smiled into her dark, lovely eyes, and swore the oath she desired. "Word of honor, my dear! No anger; not even one angry look! So let's have the terrible secret, sweet child!"

She lifted the chain from her bosom, displaying the pendant that had hitherto been hidden from sight.

Raousset swallowed hard as that flash of fire met his eyes. He recognized the stone that had been in the ring of Don Pedro, the glorious milky opal that was always green on the one side and crimson on the other. A somber prescience flashed into his mind.

"Green and red and white: they are the colors of Mexico," he said bitterly. "Well, no anger. If you accept jewels from other men, I must like it, eh?"

"No. It is a loan, Gaston, no more; the day we're married, I'll return it to him," she declared. "Look, how beautiful it is! Until then, let me play with it."

She was like a child, bathing herself in the iridescence of this gem. Raousset was amazed by the wild passion it aroused in her; he had not dreamed that a woman could be so enthralled by a mere jewel. Her promise to return it mollified his first resentment; her naive delight in the opal, her utter abandon to its hypnotic charm, actually pleased him.

Her kisses restored his confidence and his high spirits; and as they drove back into the sprawling sandhill city, he swore that the Queen of Sonora should wear the most wondrous opals in all Mexico.

He did not, however, forget Don Pedro Yorba. Perhaps she was careful that he should not forget Don Pedro; for as she kissed him at parting, she laughed and promised again that she would return the opal to Don Pedro, before their marriage.

Thus Raousset went away with the thought in his head. And that evening he looked for Don Pedro and found him at a monte table in the Lucky Strike.

DON PEDRO was winning; he was playing broad gold pieces and winning fast, a whole heap of them before him. A laughing, excited crowd was watching the game.

Raousset came and stood behind Don Pedro, who was not aware of his presence. Anger boiled in him at thought of this handsome caballero trying to buy the favors of Ynez with gems; this man, who had left a family in the South!

Then a spark touched the tinder, as someone nearby cracked a jest about luck at cards meaning no luck at love, and Don Pedro broke into a gay laugh

"Not true in my case, *amigo!*" said he, raking in more gold. "I've found both cards and ladies very kind to me in your charming city. I've nothing to complain of."

"But perhaps I have," said Raousset.

Don Pedro glanced around, recognized him, saw the storm of fury in his gaze, and came erect with an astonished oath. It was checked midway, as Raousset struck him across the face. He staggered, and recovered.

"Are you mad, Raousset?" he cried out, between amazement and anger.

"You damned Mexican spy!" retorted Raousset, determined not to bring the name of Ynez into this public brawl. "I'm not insane, no. But I have a pistol that will do the talking for me."

So he had, and brought it out.

Tumult was instant, and hasty scattering of the crowd, leaving the two men alone. Don Pedro, beside himself with rage, called for a pistol. Someone stepped up with one, and the crowd yelled with glee as Don Pedro took it.

"Back to back! Ten paces and fire!" exclaimed a voice. "Reg'lar duel, boys!"

Raousset and Don Pedro, eyeing one another, exchanged a nod. The bartender acted as master of ceremonies; amid the shouts of delight, the wagers, the roars of laughter, the two men came back to back and then stepped out. The bartender's voice counted off the paces.

"Ten! Do your damndest and no scalping!"

Raousset wheeled at the word. He was a trace ahead of Don Pedro. He waited, deliberately, till the other pistol leveled; then squeezed. The two shots roared out as one, a drift of powder-smoke belching and mingling.

Raousset felt the hot breath of a bullet past his cheek, saw Don Pedro staring wildly through the smoke; then the Mexican fell.

They laid him on a table; he was dying. Raousset gloomily looked down and met those brilliant, handsome eyes.

"Spy, Mexican spy?" murmured Don Pedro. "No. Not I. I'm not the spy, but—"

His head lolled and the life went out of him.

The crowd roared around Count Raousset, cruelly delighted. Only a Frenchy killing a Greaser, went up the word; no matter, no matter! It was all done fair and aboveboard, and no blame to anyone.

RAOUSSET pushed his way out of the throng and into the night air. What had Don Pedro meant by those last words? He pondered them vainly, frowningly, intently; he could find no meaning whatever in them. Yet that parting gasp of life must have had a deep and terrible message, had it not been cut short. The thought fascinated Raousset.

Don Pedro had been trying desperately to tell him something, as he lay dying on that table.

Those unfinished words lingered with Raousset in the days that followed. Again and again he studied them, pored over them, tried to discover what was in them.

And, in the end, he did discover their meaning.

This discovery came to him in the whitewashed cell at Guaymas, when the guards laughed at him and taunted him, and told him of the woman who greeted her lovers with a chain and a dangling jewel of fire, lit by the flames of hell.

He had learned, now, that Doña Ynez loved not him alone, but had loved many, and would love many more in her gainsome trade.

And the unfinished speech of Don Pedro was made clear to him on the white beach at Guaymas, in the early sunrise, when he smiled and faced the leveled rifles. "No. Not I." The voice of Don Pedro seemed to whisper the words to him now. "I'm not the spy, but she is! Doña Ynez, the spy for Mexico, who lured and tricked you—"

The rifles crashed. So Raousset learned everything and smiled, in the glory of the sunrise, and died like the king he might have been . . .

ALL the scene faded out, save only that sun-smitten glory lingering in the room that was lit by the glittering, shimmering iridescence of the opal.

Shipman started; those scenes had been vivid and real, flashing before him like the flashing vivid hues of the stone. Now he was plummeted back to reality.

Doña Ynez sat beside him, her eyes wide upon the glinting lights, still utterly absorbed in them. The same dusky, lovely features, the same slim feline grace—and today, for the first time, the same hint of cruelty and bewitching power and deception, as if in her lurked the same devil who had lurked in that other woman of old San Francisco!

Shipman touched the switches. The glowing crystal sphere before them slowly waned and paled, until only the needle-point of light remained in the machine; then this, too, perished. He came to his feet.

"I hope you recognized her," he said bitterly, to conceal his own tension. She only laughed a little, upon the darkness.

He switched on the light, went to the polyandroscope, took the opal from the clamp, and dropped the stone into his pocket. He turned and met her flashing eyes.

"My opal, please," she exclaimed.

She was standing now, slim and straight and lovely; and the strange fire in her eyes seemed to flame brighter. She was beautiful, and terrible.

"No, I can't give it to you, Marie Wilson; it's not yours," he said gravely, steadily. "I'm returning it to the owners. This is only my barest duty, believe me. I should hand you over as a thief; I can't do that. I still believe in you, God help me! I still hope that we can help you, cure you—"

But her swift, passionate gesture stopped him; she stepped closer to him.

"Damn your hopes!" she burst out furiously. He was thankful that the room was sound-proofed, as her voice shrilled. "Give me that opal. Give it to me. This is a trick, a trap! Hand it over and stop your mawkish talk. Give it to me, or I'll kill you!"

"Yes, I think you would—if you could," he said. Her words, her look, her action, all gave him a heart-breaking sense of defeat. "I've knocked around the world too much to be impressed."

He had to prove those words, for she struck like a flash of light, without warning. He caught the glitter of a knife; and then he had her in both hands.

A man who trades in jewels had best learn all the answers, and Shipman had learned them long ago by shore and sea. He was even more active than she, and a wild cry of pain broke from her as she found herself helpless in his grip.

He had meant to push matters and give her a lesson, a frightful one; but he could not do it. The pain in her voice, the agony he was causing her, the love that he bore her were too much for him.

The little knife fell to the floor. His grip relaxed. She caught her breath, dived for her wrap and handbag, and then was gone.

SHIPMAN removed the opal from the machine, went into his own office, and slumped into his chair before the desk. He was still sitting there, twenty minutes later, when Korvo walked in.

"Hello. They tell me she's been here again. Damned bad luck I missed her."

He came forward and pulled up a chair, holding a twist of paper up, then pocketing it.

"What's that?" demanded Shipman.

Korvo smiled gravely.

"That's the trap for the devil that's in her, next time she comes. Well, tell me what happened."

Shipman forced himself to comply. The recital graved bitter lines in that lean face of his; the recollection of her words and manner hurt deeply. But when he had done, Korvo leaned forward and spoke earnestly.

"Chief, I've been informing myself from people who do believe in demoniacal possession; and what you've just told me proves my whole theory. The way she acted today—don't you see? She's been trying to rid herself of the thing. The devil who's in her is furious at you; it's your influence that's fighting him!

"That's why she spoke as she did today —not she, but the elemental within her. And they tell me these elementals aren't very hard beings to exorcise."

Shipman leaned back and began to laugh.

"Korvo, I'm damned if I feel like laughing, but I can't help it. The way you talk about this devil, as if he were a dog under the table, a real creature. Like all tragedy the damned thing has its comic side."

"I'm not asking you to believe anything," replied Korvo. "But next time she comes, let me handle her."

"Agreed," said Shipman. "I don't think she'll be back, though."

"I do." Korvo was confident, and tapped his waistcoat pocket. "When I put this thing in the window, she'll be in to see it, never fear!".

"What is it, then?"

"Never you mind, chief! I'll confide in you when I'm ready to bait the trap. Why, this very story about the gold rush days, about Count Roausset—don't you see how that bears out my theory? We're seeing—or rather you are—various pictures from the past, not of your girl friend but of the devil that's in her. Scenes from other lives of that devil—"

"Oh, forget the whole thing, will you?" broke in Shipman. "I just can't make myself swallow this devil stuff; don't force it down my throat."

"Very well!" assented Korvo cheerfully. "Hello! Is that the opal?"

He leaned forward, as if to pick up the opal that lay on Shipman's desk. Then he checked himself. He was looking at something else lying there by the opal: a chamois pouch whose drawstrings were knotted tight.

"Chief! Is that—can it be—"

"It's the pouch with all her stolen stones in it," said Shipman grimly.

"Good Lord! You mean, she gave it to you?"

"Not by a damned sight! I slipped it out of her handbag while the show was on."

Korvo whistled. "Good work, chief, good work! She'll be back tomorrow sure; now you've got her. She'll be back to beg, borrow or steal those gems."

"No." Shipman dissented stonily. "They're going to that insurance detective at once; now! Don't you see, man? It's all I can do for her—get her immunity. I'll tell a fine story. The detective doesn't want her pinched anyway. He'll get back these stones. That means he'll give up and let her alone."

"And she'll start in stealing stones all over again."

"Damn it!" cried out Shipman, his voice tortured. "What else can I do?"

"You might have some faith in what I say," replied Korvo quietly. "After all, chief, there are a lot of people and sects and religions in this world, who do believe in devils!"

Shipman looked at him with hard, bitter eyes for a long moment.

"All right," he said abruptly. "You're the doctor. But if you fail—"

"Then she's no worse off. Nor are you. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Shipman.

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

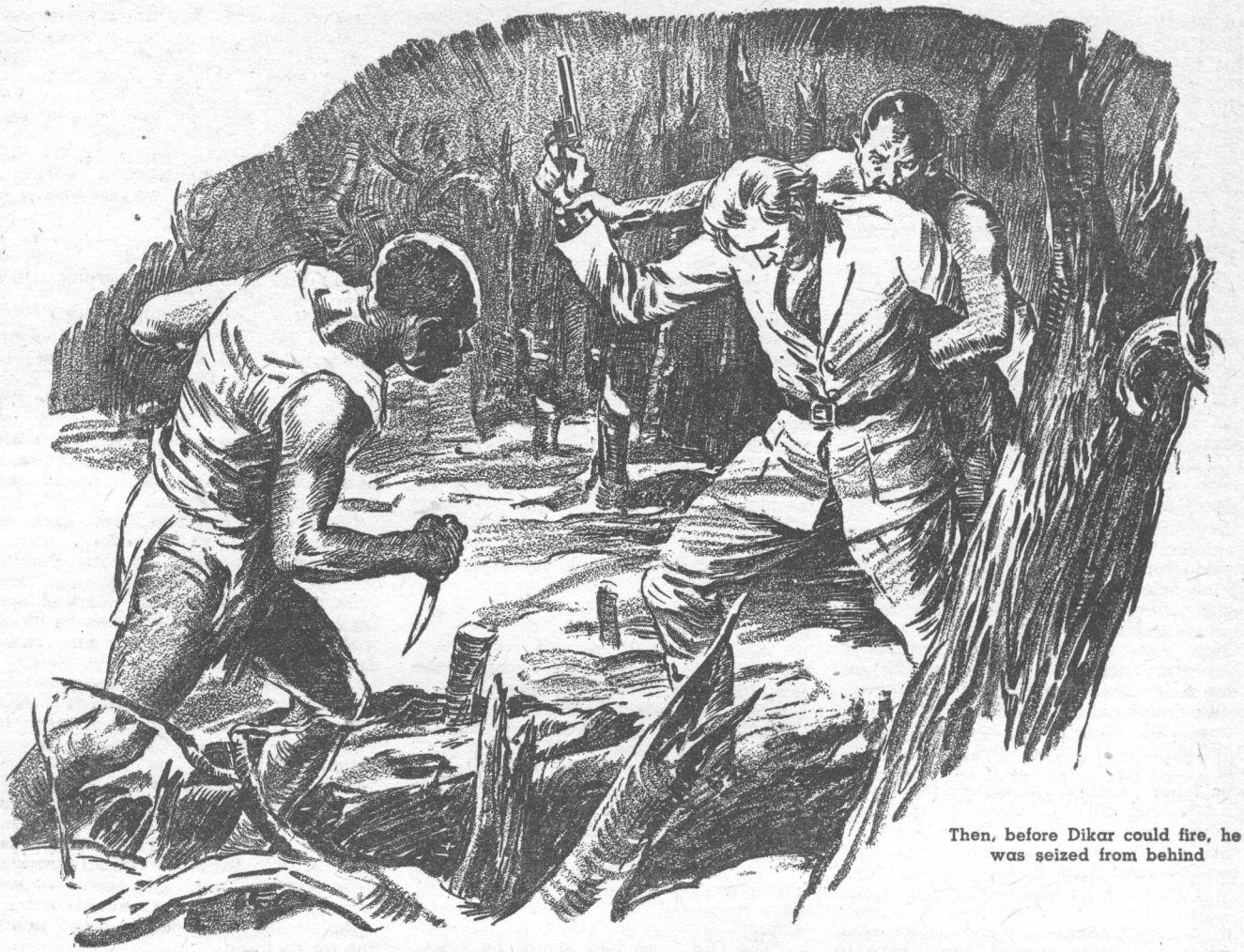
This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)



Then, before Dikar could fire, he was seized from behind

Long Road to Tomorrow

By Arthur Leo Zagat

Start now this exciting story of Dikar's journey toward freedom

IT IS a dark time for America, with her land held by an alien tyrant and her people enslaved; but now each day the army of rebellion grows stronger. Led by NORMAN FENTON, President of America, this army has marched to the foot of the Great Smokies; the plan is to surprise and vanquish YEE HASHAMOTO'S Asafric army.

Only DIKAR suspects that the Asafrics have arranged a trap.

His suspicion is borne out with terrible effect. Suddenly the sky is black with Asafric planes; the bombs rain down on the trapped American army. After the endless moments of terror Dikar and MARILEE arise from their hiding place to find that the havoc, though tragic, has not been disastrous. And now WALT BENNET comes to Dikar with a request from President Norman Fenton.

THE heavy guns of the Asafrics are emplaced on the mountain slopes, commanding this valley where the Americans are camped. In one spot, called Newfound Gap, a nest of lighter guns—archies—is situated, and if the Americans can capture this stronghold they will be able to make short work of the other Asafric fortifications.

Only the agile, mountain-trained Bunch would have the slightest chance of scaling the cliffs of Newfound Gap, and the odds are a thousand to one against their succeeding. So Norman Fenton asks rather than commands that they undertake the perilous assault.

TO A MAN the Bunch agree to make the attempt. So Dikar leads them up the bare, steep mountainside, where the least sound will betray their presence to the Asafric soldiers. At last they reach the Gap; they charge the Black soldiers, and the battle is savage.

Dikar, having maneuvered an archie into position, blows the Asafric headquarters to fragments and so concludes the fight. But then, with victory in his hands, he topples suddenly from his gun-seat, to fall into blackness. . . . .

CHAPTER V

MONUMENT BETWEEN BATTLES

THE earth was springy under Dikar's running feet and its coolness was good to feel. The woods smells—the brown smell of the earth, the green smell of brush and leaves—were good in Dikar's nostrils. Best of all was the silver, happy sound of Marilee's laughter as she ran from him, hid just ahead by a green tangle of brush.

All of a sudden Marilee's laughter ended.

Dikar broke through the green curtain that hid Marilee. He stopped short. The brush had been cleared away here, so that he could see farther through the gray-brown tree-trunks than Marilee could have run, but there was no Marilee to be seen, not even the press of her feet on the moss.

Dikar stood very still, a muscle

This story began in last week's Argosy

twitching in his cheek. A line of excited ants hurried through the moss near his feet, each carrying a white egg in its strong jaws. A green snake slid lithely out from behind a gnarled elbow of root, its tiny black eyes bright in its three-cornered, flat head. A bump on a stone was a warty toad, so still that it might be dead. A fly flitted too near it and the toad's tongue flicked out of, in again to its wide, ugly mouth. The fly was gone.

Over Dikar's head a squirrel chrrred, scolding. Dikar grinned and his knees bent, straightened to send him flying upward. His hands, upflung, caught an oak's sturdy bough. His feet found hold on the bough. Dikar stood erect, was climbing the swaying ladder of leafy branches quick and sure as any squirrel. In the green heart of the tree, Marilee was curled on a branching fork, her gray eyes dancing.

Her hair was a silken glory about her, but only her skirt of plaited grasses, her breast-circlets of woven flowers, covered her brown loveliness. Legs astraddle on a bough beneath, Dikar plucked his mate from her perch and held her, arm-cradled, over empty space.

"I'm going to drop you," he growled, deep in his chest, "for thinkin you could get away from me. Hey! Let go my beard."

She only pulled its golden hairs harder as she laughed. "Fins!" Dikar cried. "Fins! I won't drop you." He settled down in the fork where she had been, held Marilee nestling against him.

"Oh, Dikar." Marilee's voice lifted with happiness. "You jumped up here like you'd never been hurt. You're all well again, Dikar!"

"Didn't I tell you I was?"

"Yes, you did. But I couldn't believe it. I kept thinkin how the doctor said, when you were carried down here to Norrisdam a month ago, that you wouldn't even be able to walk till the end of the summer."

"Aw! What do those fool doctors know? We got along pretty good without 'em, all the time we lived on our Mountain, didn't we? They don't know anythin."

"Silly!" Marilee frowned. "Doctors are awful smart. They know a lot—"

"But they don't know as much as you do about the roots and grasses that heal hurts. If it hadn't been for you I'd be still layin on that bed."

"I'll never forget how you looked, all bloody and torn with the Asafric bullets—"

"That first week must have been a bad time for you. I'm sorry you had such a bad time on account of me." He gathered her closer to him. "Let me show you how sorry I am, Marilee. Marilee." He bent his face to hers.

FOR a long time she would not untwine her arms from around him, but at last she let him put her on the bough beside him. He leaned back against the bark of the tree and she nestled close against him.

"Ah," Marilee sighed, eyelids drooped, moist-red lips wistful. "This is grand, just you an me alone together. It's like we were back in our tree on the tiptop of the Mountain, lookin out at the Far Land an wonderin what was there."

A shadow stole over Dikar's face. "Maybe I shouldn't ever have led the Bunch down off the Mountain." This was the thought that had been bothering him. "Maybe I was wrong to do that. Look, Marilee. If I hadn't little Carlberger would be alive today, an Louvance an—"

"An Normanfenton would be skin an bones dried by the wind, Dikar, hangin in chains from the top of the Empire State Buildin in New York." Marilee pulled a leaf from a twig. "Walt would still be a Beast Man, dirty an starvin in the woods below our Mountain, or maybe the Asafrics would have caught him an put him in one of their cages in which a man can neither stand up nor sit nor lie down.

"Johndawson— Oh! You know as well as I do that if you had not led the Bunch off the Mountain, there would not be anyone fightin to make America free."

"*We* were free on our Mountain, Marilee. We lived our own happy life there, an nobody bothered us."

"Yes." Marilee pulled little bits from the leaf, let them flutter from long, slim fingers. "Yes, Dikar. We were free. We were happy. We could not hear the whips of the Asafrics on the backs of white men an women. We could not see the people herded in filth an sufferin inside the barbed wire of the concentration camps.

"We were not bein driven by the guns an the kicks of the Blacks to slave in factories an mines, makin things not for ourselves but our masters. All of those things and lots more, lots worse, were happenin in the Far Land, but on our Mountain we lived the good life."

"We earned it, Marilee. We worked hard for it, all the years since the Old Ones brought us to the Mountain."

"An gave us the Musts an Must-Nots, the Law, by which we should live happy—then died so that we could live free. When the Asafric soldiers came to the Mountain, the Old Ones did not run away an hide in the woods, did they? They went down off the Mountain to meet the Asafrics. They gave their lives gladly.

"The Old Ones had heard the voice," she went on, "that you yourself told me about in our tree on the tiptop of the Mountain. They had heard the Voice that came into a dark place under the ground where mothers huddled their little children to them while the thunder of bombs humbled overhead. They'd heard it sayin: 'In these little children lies America's last, faint hope of—of a—'" Marilee hesitated, looked at Dikar, her brows knitting.

"'Of a tomorrow,'" Dikar helped her, "'when democracy, liberty, freedom,'" all of a sudden his voice was clear and certain, "'shall reconquer the green an pleasant fields that tonight lie devastated.'"

"YOU do remember!" Marilee's face was alight again. "You do remember the Voice you heard a long time ago in a dream. You have not forgotten it."

"You have made me remember it, my sweet." Dikar knew now why Marilee had brought him up here into this tree that was so like the tree where he'd told her, first of all the Bunch, about his dream and the Voice in it. "I had forgotten. This morning, when for the first time since Clingman's Dome I came to Brekfes with the Bunch an looked around the table, what I saw made me forget my dream."

"What you saw?"

Dikar's hands closed into fists, so tight their knuckles whitened. "Eight Boys only, Marilee, are left of the twenty-six I led down off the Mountain. Nine, countin myself. The rest are dead an buried."

"There was a smile on Franksmith's face when we buried him, Dikar. His body was all torn with the Asafric's bullets, but there was a happy, peaceful smile on his face. You know there was."

"There was no smile on Bessalton's face, this mornin. There was no light in her eyes. She sat there, white an silent, an if Alicekane had not kept after her, she would not have eaten a bite."

"There are smiles, Dikar, on the faces of hundreds and hundreds of women, all across this land. They have hope now, but they would not have it if you had not led Franksmith an Bessalton an all the rest of the Bunch down from the Mountain. Did you do wrong, Dikar, when you did that?"

"No, Marilee; I did right. I did—"

Dikar broke off and his head canted, listening to a call from somewhere below. "Helloooo. Helloooo, Dikar." It was coming nearer. "Dikar. Where are you? Helloooo."

Dikar dropped down to the tree's lowest bough, pushed aside leaves from his face. "Here, Nedsmall." Bushes were threshing, down there. "Here I am." The toad hopped from his stone and the green snake flicked back behind its elbow of root. "What is it? What do you want?"

The bushes parted and Nedsmall came into sight. "Oh Dikar." He looked up and sunbeams danced on his freckle-dusted, impish face. "I been lookin all over for you." He was the smallest of the Boys. "Walt sent word you're wanted at Headquarters. You're to meet him on top of the dam in half an hour."

"Dikar's wanted at Headquarters?" Marilee was alongside Dikar on the bough, the two standing there without using their hands to hold on, comfortable as if on the ground. "What for?"

"I wasn't told," Nedsmall shrugged. "But I know what I hope." He looked excited. "I'm tired hangin around here doin nothin. I hope they got another job for us to do."

Dikar heard Marilee's breath pull in. "All right, Nedsmall," he said. "Thanks for tellin me." He watched the youngster run off.

"So soon," Marilee whispered. "Oh Dikar. Why couldn't they let me have you for myself a little while longer."

Dikar smiled at her, but there was no smile in his blue eyes. "You could have had me all for yourself, all the time, if we'd stayed on the Mountain. But I seem to remember your sayin that it would have been wrong for us to have stayed there."

"I said that." Marilee laid her little hand on Dikar's arm and her fingers were icy cold, trembling. "An I meant it. I was talkin to the Boss of the Bunch then. Just now I'm thinkin about my mate."

CHAPTER VI

LOOK ON MY WORK . . .

NORRISDAM was a white stone wall that men had built, joining one great hill to another. Its top was wide enough for ten men to walk abreast, and its bottom was so far below the top that men down there looked no bigger to Dikar than his thumb.

That was on one side. On the other side was water, a great lake of water stretching back between green, forested hills as far as Dikar could see. "The lake is as deep as the dam is high," Walt told Dikar as they walked along the top of the dam. "But before the dam was built there was only a little muddy river way down there on what is now the lake's bottom."

"Why was this dam built?" Dikar

asked. "Why did they make the lake here?"

"Because the farm lands of eight states, from the mountains of Virginia to the Ohio River, were being washed away by the spring floods, and in the summer what soils the floods had not washed away was cracked and thirsty with drought, the crops yellow and dying.

"So engineers built this dam, and others like it. It was a great thing they did, Dikar. They harnessed the floods and the storms and gave the people of these states fertile fields and cheap power. They gave the people a better life."

"Men built mountains like this," Dikar's forehead was wrinkled, his eyes puzzled, "so that they could have a better life?"

"Exactly."

"They were smart enough an strong enough to do that," Dikar said, as if to himself. He stared at Walt. "Then why couldn't they keep hold of the mountains they built? Why couldn't they go on making their life better and better? What happened to them?"

Walt shrugged with a bitter smile. "I don't know," he said. "The men who built the mountains were engineers. But the men who had the job of making the better life work and keep on working—they were statesmen." He started walking faster. "We haven't got time to talk about that now, Dikar. General Fenton's waiting for us."

They came to the end of the road along the dam's top and hurried across a wide, stone-paved field where hundreds of men in gray-blue uniforms were lounged. Dikar was thinking that maybe if people had taken time to talk about things like this before it was too late, things would be different now. But he didn't say the thought aloud, because they were going into the stone building that was called Headquarters here at Norrisdam.

NORMANFENTON stood looking out of a high, round-topped window when Walt and Dikar came into his room. He seemed thinner than the last time Dikar had seen him, at Wespoint, but he was still very tall, and his long legs and long arms still looked as if they'd been hitched on to his body in a hurry and not very carefully.

But when Normanfenton turned and Dikar saw his face once more, Dikar forgot how clumsy his body was.

His great head, with its gray-threaded, straggly black beard, seemed somehow too big for that ungainly body. Gaunt cheeks were molded by bones very near the surface of the skin, and the skin was scribbled over with a tracery of wrinkles. fine as the threads of a spider-web. Under a broad and thoughtful forehead, eyes were deep-sunken and somber.

In Normanfenton's eyes was pain, and a dreadful tiredness, but in them there was also the soft light of a vision seen far off. Seeing Dikar, he smiled and his whole face seemed to brighten with a warm and tender welcome.

"Ah, my boy." His voice was not very loud, but it seemed to fill the big room as he held out a gnarled hand to take Dikar's strong, brown one. "I have not had the opportunity yet to thank you for what you and your—Bunch did up there on the roof of the Smokies."

"I—uh—" Dikar swallowed, shifted from one foot to the other. "It was nothing, Norman—Mr. President." He remembered just in time how he was supposed to talk to Normanfenton. "Anybody could have done the same thing."

"I don't agree. Perhaps others might have had the same will and courage, but you possess certain unique skills that none without your peculiar background can match. And it is of those particular skills that we have need again, or I should not have sent for you as soon as I heard that you had recovered from your wounds."

"What job do you want me to do?" Dikar asked. "Tell me."

The warm smile flickered in Normanfenton's eyes and then faded. "Captain Bennet." He looked at Walt. "Will you be good enough to send the guard outside beyond earshot and remain at the door yourself so that we can be absolutely certain there are no eavesdroppers?"

Walt saluted and obeyed.

"When we were on the Mountain together, Dikar," said the President, turning to him again, "I think I taught you something about maps. Am I right?"

"Yes. You taught me a little then an Walt—Cap'n Bennet—has taught me a lot more since."

"Good. That will make my explanation easier. Look here." Normanfenton took Dikar's arm, led him to the wall to the left of the window. "This is a map of the southern quarter of the United States, Mexico and Central America."

It was a bigger map than any Dikar had ever seen, and he thought it a shame someone had stuck a lot of different colored pins into it. "I didn't think we would be concerned with that region for a long time yet," Normanfenton went on. "But I've had some news this morning—"

He stopped, sighed. His fingers tightened on Dikar's arm. "Bad news, Dikar. Danger threatens our cause. A graver danger than ever before."

Normanfenton put his forefinger on the map. "I'm going to send you down there, my boy. It will be a miracle if you can get there. It will be a miracle if you can accomplish what I'm sending you to do. But the cause of freedom can be saved only by a miracle now."

IT WAS very quiet in the room, so quiet that as Normanfenton stopped talking for a minute, Dikar could hear the rustling of the ivy that grew thick on the wall outside, the *lap, lap* of the lake's waters close to the bottom of that wall.

And the slow throb of the blood in his ears.

"Only by a miracle," Normanfenton sighed, "and so very many things can happen to prevent you from working that miracle. If what I'm going to tell you should leak out to the enemy—" The look of pain deepened in his face. "We must take every precaution that it shall not. You must repeat what you are about to hear to no one, Dikar. Not even to that lovely wife of yours. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Dikar said through cold lips, but he didn't. He was wondering why Normanfenton didn't want him to tell Marilee.

"Not that I don't trust her as much as I do you, but a single inadvertent remark—There are spies in camp here, my boy." The look of pain deepened on the Leader's face. "Matters have reached the enemy that only someone on my personal staff could have known. This matter *must not.*"

He turned abruptly to the map. "Now that's understood, I'll explain what it's all about. First, perhaps, I had better tell you how things stand now."

Dikar moved to the other side of the President so that he could see better.

"After we took Newfound Gap," Normanfenton began, "we—" Dikar whirled away from him. Face suddenly white, he bounded to the window, leaned out.

He'd heard, from outside here, a sudden gasp, quickly cut off, and a threshing of leaves. Someone clinging to the vine to listen had missed his hold and grabbed for a better one to save himself from falling.

He hadn't saved himself! There was a splash from the water below. Dikar saw a blurred form deep under the lake's surface. Then he had vaulted the sill and he was plunging down into the icy waters of Norris Lake.

CHAPTER VII

HOPE LIES IN THE JUNGLE

A History of the Asiatic-African World Hegemony, Zafir Uscudan, LL.D (Singapore) F.I.H.S., etc. Third Edition, vol. 3. Chap. XXVII p 988.

. . . Inspired by the manner in which Dikar and his Bunch had, at fearful cost, used their woodland skills to breach the Asafrics' mountain breastworks and made possible the union of the two branches of his Eastern Army across the Tennessee Valley, General Norman Fenton resolved to attempt a similar junction between these forces and the rebel Americans who had gained virtual control of the central Mid-west.

To this ambitious project, Viceroy Yee Hashamoto's gunboat patrol of the Mississippi interposed a formidable obstacle. Following the pattern of the tactics by which the Great Uprising had grown from a mere rioting of a few disaffected slaves to the dignity of a major insurrection, President Fenton initiated simultaneous feints-in-force toward Chicago and New Orleans, contriving, through patriots posing as renegade Mudskins, to get word of these to Hashamoto.

The latter at once concentrated his strength on the threatened cities, setting up traps like the one at the Great Smoky Mountains that the Americans had escaped only through Dikar's brilliant exploit.

On May 23rd-24th, Fenton delivered his genuine assault against the weakened forces that had been left to hold Cairo, Illinois, and its vicinity. His stratagem was completely successful. The Mississippi was crossed, and penetration of the Ozark Plateau from the bridgehead thus established.

In the face of these repeated defeats, Yee Hashamoto still sedulously concealed from the Asiatic-African Confederation's Supreme Command at home any knowledge that he was in difficulty. To explain why, we must refer back to Chapter II of this History.

The reader will recall that here we discussed the characteristics that so well fitted the leaders of the Asafric Cabal for the program of world conquest on which they embarked when "Axis diplomacy", having invited them as allies into the arena of *Welt Politik*, revealed to them the rotten beams behind the facade of vaunted white supremacy. We also pointed out a psychological weakness, the Oriental preoccupation with "Face."

HASHAMOTO had only to draw upon the Confederation's tremendous military resources to crush the American Uprising, even now. But by so doing, he must admit his own failure. He must admit that a slave whom he had paraded through the countryside, naked and in chains, had out-maneuvered, out-generaled him. He would "lose face." This was unthinkable.

It was also inevitable, unless he took strong measures at once. There were increasingly urgent demands from across

the Pacific for explanation of why the flow of cargoes from his bailiwick was so materially dwindling, and the Viceroy was running out of excuses. With each victory, the numbers of the insurrectionists were growing as liberated slaves flocked to their standards. He could not very much longer keep his secret.

From this dilemma, Hashamoto saw one means of escape. The Asafrics' first incursion into the Western Hemisphere had been by way of South America. That continent was still docile. Hashamoto had two tank divisions guarding the Panama Canal, but no threat there was possible.

They were the reinforcements he needed. All he had to do was bring one of those divisions up through Central America and Mexico. Using Texas as a springboard, they could strike the Americans on their exposed southern flank, drive north through the Central Plain and then, facing westward, herd the insurrectionists toward the Rockies.

In the latter range would be waiting the West Coast troops that had so far maintained undisputed control over California and the Columbia River Valley. Caught between two fires, a full half of Fenton's forces would be destroyed.

Meanwhile, relieved of concern with the prairies, Hashamoto's present contingents would be equal to the task of annihilating the remaining rebels.

Viceroy Yee Hashamoto's wireless flashed the orders. Perhaps he was not aware that the Americans could intercept and decode the message. Perhaps he did not care. It was a good plan, and even if General Norman Fenton, in his headquarters at Norris Dam, knew about it, he was helpless to defeat it. . . .

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"IT'S a good plan"—there was deep worry in Normanfenton's voice—"that of Hashamoto's." Dikar shivered a little. The fawnskin draped over his left shoulder and around his brown, strong body was still chilly-wet from the lake, though he'd been listening so long that the water had dried from his thighs and his legs.

"We will be helpless against his tanks, once they reach Texas. Here." The General's bony finger rested on the map, just above where the blue that meant water took a big bite out of the bottom of the United States. "They've got to be stopped before they get this far, and that's what I'm putting up to you."

"To *me!*" Dikar gasped. "How can I stop 'em?"

Dikar could swim like a fish, but he'd been blinded by the splash of his own wild dive out of the window and before he could see again, the spy who had been listening under it had swum too far under water to be seen.

"My only hope, son," Normanfenton answered him, "that they can be stopped rests on you."

The funny thing was that though some of the Boys and Girls of the Bunch had been in swimming where the woods came down to the shore on the other side of Norris Lake, none of them had seen any stranger come up out of it. Dikar had sent the Bunch to see if they could pick up the spy's trail and had returned to Normanfenton.

Now he said, "But Normanfenton, how do we have any chance of stoppin' two divisions of Asafrics? There's only nine Boys left in the Bunch—"

"I said *you,* my boy, not your Bunch. What has to be done can be done by you alone, or it cannot be done at all."

The listener could have heard only that Normanfenton was going to send Dikar somewhere that must be kept a secret even from Marilee, and now there were soldiers in a little boat out on the lake to make sure no one climbed the ivy again.

"Why should anything be easier for me to do alone than with help?" Dikar asked.

"Please stop breaking in on me like that, young man." Normanfenton's tired smile took away the hurt of the sharp words. "Give me a chance to explain. One man can do what is to be done as well as nine or ninety.

"To get to where I am sending you, you will have to steal through the enemy's lines, through six hundred miles of territory held and patrolled by his troops. Capture will mean a particularly horrible death for you, for me the end of my last hope of checkmating Hashamoto.

"You will need every atom of your skill in moving silently and unseen, and any companion you take with you would only increase your peril."

"All right." Dikar shrugged. "Where am I goin', an' what am I to do there?"

Normanfenton turned back to the map. "You see how Mexico and then Central America narrow," his finger moved downward on the many-colored sheet pinned to the wall, "curving around the Gulf of Mexico to here, where the Panama Canal cuts through it."

"The Panama—That's where the tanks are comin from!"

"That's where they will be coming from, according to the messages we've intercepted, about three or four weeks from now."

"Three or four weeks! What are they waitin for?"

"DIVISIONS of tanks cannot move at a moment's notice, my boy, like your Bunch. They've got to accumulate supplies of fuel, munitions, food, to sustain them on the march. Their machinery must be repaired, put in perfect order.

"There are innumerable details to be taken care of to prepare them for a long campaign, even more than usual for these divisions, which have been somewhat disorganized by their idleness. And all this, Dikar, must be done surreptitiously, lest the officers of vessels passing through the Canal observe the unusual activity and report it to the Asafric Supreme Command.

"Viceroy Hashamoto fears his own home government more than he does us," Normanfenton sighed. "And rightly."

"But if it's goin to take 'em so long to get started an we already know what they're up to, couldn't we get ready in that time to meet an fight em?"

"Meet them where? They will have all Texas to spread out over, and we have no way of anticipating where they will choose to strike. Fight them how?

"In a battle of movement, tanks can be fought only by tanks, Dikar, and we have none. We have nothing that would give us the slightest chance against them unless—an' that's the whole crux of my plan—unless they can be taken by surprise, unprepared for action, their crews unsuspecting an enemy anywhere near.

"Now," the General went on, "all of this isthmus, except for some narrow stretches along its coast and along a few short, unconnected stretches of railway, remains pretty much the same as it was when Columbus first saw it.

"Where the Sierra Madre range does not thrust its crags to the sky, a thick and well-nigh impenetrable tropic growth bars travel. There is only one practicable route by which it can be traversed, the Pan-American Highway, a broad concrete road that was completed just a year before the invasion. Since Hashamoto does not dare requisition transports to convey his tanks by water, that is the way they must come."

Normanfenton's finger started moving back up on the map. "This way, Dikar, skirting the inward base of the mountains that join the Andes to the Rockies. Through Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras.

"And here," the finger paused just before it would have crossed a line that zig-zagged across the picture of narrow land, the colors different each side of it, "as they approach Gautemala's Mexican border, is where they must be stopped, if they're to be stopped anywhere."

"Why there?" Dikar goggled. "Why just where the land's widest of all?" Beside where the general's finger rested a kind of bump stuck out into the water-blue. "I—I can't make out why you should pick that place."

"I'm picking it precisely because the land is widest here, because here the highway passes along the base of the Yucatan peninsula." Normanfenton pointed to the big bump. "Wilderness as the rest of the isthmus is, it is a tamed, gentle region compared to the primordial jungle of Yucatan. And, son, when the Asafric hordes overran Texas and Louisiana and Mississippi, a large number of Americans fled across the Gulf of Mexico to this green hell in Yucatan.

"Many of the boats that carried them were sunk by the guns of the enemy fleet. Many were wrecked by a hurricane. But some reached the shores of Yucatan and Campeche and Quintana Roo, and their passengers found sanctuary in the interior.

"What became of them we do not know. The sisal that was Yucatan's only crop was of no use to the Asafric, and so they did not bother to conquer that region. The underground wireless of the Secret Net never received a response from that green mystery. The jungle swallowed the refugees; they vanished."

DIKAR scratched his head. "You don't know how many there are. You don't know if they're still alive in there. You don't know anythin' about them. But you expect—"

"I know this about them," Normanfenton broke in. "I know that they were Americans once and that whatever they have become, whatever the jungle has done to them, if they still live they are still Americans.

"I'm gambling on that, Dikar. I'm gambling my hopes that the Cause I lead may still be saved, if you can reach them and tell them that their countrymen are fighting for freedom and are in danger."

"They'll come out of their jungles, when the Asafric tanks pass by—"

"And stop them." A thrill came into Normanfenton's deep voice, and as he turned to Dikar, he seemed suddenly taller in his faded, gray-blue uniform. "Stop them dead, there in the shadow of the Sierra Madre. Unless they do, we fail. I cannot believe God means to let us fail. I cannot believe that needing a miracle now, He will not help us work that miracle."

He spread wide his gnarled hands, bony and bulging with an old man's net of veins under yellowing, transparent skin. "I send you alone on a long, long road, Dikar, every inch of which will be fraught with peril of death for you.

"I send you into a steamy jungle to find men who for all I know may have turned into savages. I send you to ask them, for the sake of an ideal which almost surely they have forgotten, to attack trained soldiers who have conquered the world.

"By all the laws of reason it is a mad

project, foredoomed to failure. I put my faith in that God who created men to be free, that it will succeed. And it must."

. . . Dikar walked slowly back across the top of Norrisdam. The hushed gray of dusk, sifting down through the tree-clad hills to veil the lake with darkling mist, was answered by a gray hush within him.

Dikar's eyes burned with long looking at the maps that Normanfenton had showed him, hundreds of maps picturing every yard of the way he was to go. Dikar's head throbbed, full to bursting with all that Normanfenton had told him, with all the hundreds of things Dikar must not forget.

Dikar's heart ached with knowing that tonight, for the first time since he could remember, he must leave Marilee without telling her where he was going.

Tonight he was going to leave the Bunch that he'd been Boss of so long. Without a word of goodbye, he was going to slip away into the dark and he had as much hope of coming back to them as—as this twig, shooting over the dam's spillway and down into the foaming flood below, had of ever going back up the River to the woods.

Like that twig, Dikar was being carried along by a rushing river, far and far from the woods he'd loved, far from the Mountain that was his home.

TO DIKAR'S left and right, along the sides of the clearing into which he'd come were the little houses that Walt had called log-cabins when he'd brought the Bunch here to show them where they were to live. At the other end a great fire sent its leaping, orange light up into the spreading branches of a tall oak.

Down the middle of the open space a long table ran, the Girls bustling around it as they set it for supper. The firelight danced on the Girls' smooth, brown arms, on the thighs peeping briefly through the lustrous cloaks of their hair. Almost as tall as Dikar, but black-haired and bearded, Johnstone talked with Alfoster. Nearer the fire, Patmara and Abestein and Henfield threw little stones at a mark they had blazed on the oak.

The clearing was filled with happy laughter, friendly chatter, but beyond the fire the woods were black and the sunset wind made a rushing sound in the treetops.

"Dikar!"

Marilee had seen him. She was coming toward him, her hands held out to him, her body slim and straight. Every graceful line of her, every movement was a song swelling in Dikar's throat, an ache in his arms.

As Dikar waited for Marilee, the fire flared and he saw another girl who stood very still in the shadows. Her form was slim and straight as Marilee's, but the long fall of hair that robed it was a lusterless black. Her eyes seemed to watch Marilee, but there was no life in them. Her hands hung empty, half open as though something very dear had spilled from them and was gone forever.

Bessalton.

The wind in the treetops made a rushing sound, like that of a wide, dark river flowing from here into the far and lonely night.

CHAPTER VIII

NO FAREWELL

IT WAS very dark in the cabin, so dark that Dikar could not see Marilee at all, though he could feel her warm, soft body close against his; smell the clean, fresh sweetness of her; hear the whisper of her long, tired breathing that told him she was deep in sleep at last.

He'd waited a long time, staring aching-eyed into the dark, till he could be certain that she slept. Now, very carefully, he slid his arm from under her and slipped from the bed, and she did not stir.

Dikar's heart was very heavy, but his feet were light and silent as he felt for and found the apron of twigs Marilee had plaited for him on their Mountain. He tied it around him, fastened to its belt his knife in the sheath Marilee had made for him out of the skin of a deer. These were the only things Dikar took with him from the cabin. These—and the memory of Marilee.

Dikar saw nothing of the dark woods as he went down through them. He heard nothing of the uncountable little voices of the woods. He went down through them silent as any creature that prowls the sunless hours, but only because he could not move through the woods in any other way, not because he gave thought to what he was doing.

He'd shut out thought, because if he thought what he was doing, he could not do it at all.

A sound of voices stopped him, at the bottom of the wooded hill.

Dikar crouched just within the bushes that ended the woods, peered out at the road that crossed the top of Norrisdam and then went around this hill and away. The voices came from the black bulk of a big, covered truck that loomed out there against the lake's paler glimmer.

Dikar rounded his mouth and made the sound of a hoot-owl.

"WHAT'S the idea startin' us out this time uh night," one of the voices grumbled, "without us even knowin' what we're carryin' or where we're goin'?"

Dikar could see other trucks standing on the road. There were five of them, and this was the middle one. "You think they're gonna tell you?" another hoarse voice said. "Yer in the army now, Carson. Yer not behin' th' plow."

"Plow, hell! I was runnin' a loom over to Sweetwater before I joined up. With a big Black crackin' a bull-whip across my back every time a thread got snarled. First thing I did, when I heard our boys come a-whoopin' inter town, I grabbed thet whip out of his han' an' spattered his brains all over the floor with its butt."

"What're yeh crabbin' about, then?"

"Who's crabbin'? Cripes! Fer what Fenton done fer me, he could tell me t'go jump off th' top uh thet dam there an' I'd do it. All I'm sayin', I'm hankerin' to know what's the idea us bein' turned out in th' dead uh night an' findin' these trucks a-waitin' fer us, all loaded an' locked up so's we don't know whut's in 'em."

"Why? I'll tell yeh why, Tom Carson. Thar's spies in camp. That's why."

"Spies, me eye! Thet's a lot uh bunk."

"The hell it is. Didn't one get away this mornin', thet climbed up th' wall uh Headquarters ter take a shot at General Fenton?"

"I still say it's bunk, if that bunch uh Dikar's couldn't even spot where the guy come out o' th' lake, there wasn't never no guy in it. They even sent divers down t' see if he was caught in th' spillway an' they couldn't—"

"All right, men!" The dark shape that was suddenly in the road had Walt's voice. "You'll be moving in a minute. Your instructions remain unchanged. Maintain as much distance behind the truck ahead as you can without losing sight of it. Watch for a sudden stop. Show no lights, keep your motor running as quietly as possible, and on no account use your horn. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes, Cap'n Bennet."

"I shall be on the leading truck. In case of emergency, cut your muffler out for a count of two and I'll stop the motorcade, come back to you. That's all."

Walt moved on toward the head of the line. Carson exclaimed softly. "Must be somethin' big up ef th' general's own pussonal aide's ridin' with us."

Dikar's muscles were twitching under his skin. He was really going. When Walt had said, "Your instructions remain unchanged," he'd told Dikar that Normanfenton had heard nothing new to make him change his mind. When Walt had said, "I shall be on the leading truck," he'd told Dikar that he was going along as far as the trucks were going.

THE motor of the first truck made sound. Another one throbbed in the darkness, and now the one here in front of Dikar came alive. It was moving. The next one came slowly past him, and then the last.

Dikar lifted out in the road, leaped for the narrow shelf across its back. His foot missed, his fingerhold on a knob at the corner slipped; and then his toes caught in a loop of chain and he was all right.

The truck was moving very slowly. Dikar got up on the little shelf, groped for the padlock that held the doors closed. A tug, and it came loose. Dikar pulled one door open, climbed in through it, pulled it shut, making sure it didn't slam. The blackness was thick, but his hand found a loose little board at the door's edge, and he turned it to hold the door closed.

The hoot-owl signal to Walt, the padlock that wasn't really locked, this little board, were the first three of all the things Normanfenton had given Dikar to remember.

He was squeezed between the door and what felt like a rough wooden wall rising just inside. The truck swayed a lot. That was because the road twisted like a snake, crawling down the hillside. Wheels rumbled underneath and the chain that had saved Dikar clanked as it hit up against something.

The clanking stopped, all of a sudden, just as there was a soft bump against the end of the truck. Dikar's scalp prickled, and then he remembered how narrow the road down the hill was, so narrow that the bushes on either side of it would scrape the sides of the trucks.

In some places the boughs of trees met over the road. It must be a very leafy bough hanging low that had bumped the truck's roof.

Now they must be at the bottom of the hill and the road must be getting straight, because the rumbling told Dikar they were going faster and faster. He squeezed around to face the wooden wall and his hands crawled up it, feeling that it was made up of big wooden boxes, piled high. When he got his arms stretched up over his head, he could just reach the top of the boxes. His hands closed on an edge and he pulled himself up.

The space under the truck's roof was just big enough for Dikar to scrouge into it. He didn't have to inch along very far before the top of the boxes ended.

Dikar worked himself around till he lay sidewise along the inner edge of the boxes and then let his legs down over the edge. He dropped down into a black space.

THE space was as wide as the truck, but toward the front another wall of boxes closed it off. Just the other side of this there must be a hole in the front wall of the truck because Dikar could hear someone say, "I don't see why they're

makin' us drive in the dark. It would be different if we weren't allowed to show as many lights and fires as we want around camp."

"We ain't in camp, now, you dope. The Asafrics ain't sendin' planes to bomb us there 'cause they don't want to wreck the dam, but we're gettin' far enough away from it so they don't have to be afraid of that. If they spot us now. . . ."

Dikar didn't pay any more attention to what the men up front were saying. He was down on his knees and his fingers were prying at the side of the middle box of the lowest row.

It swung out like a door. Dikar reached inside the box, found a round thing that was cold to the feel. He touched a little knob on its side, and light leaped out from it.

The light showed him other things in the box. There was a green uniform spotted with the dried blood of the dead Asafric it had belonged to. There was a shiny revolver and a shiny leather belt filled with bullets.

There were two of the flat glasses that you could look into and see yourself in, even better than you could see yourself in a clear, smooth pool in the woods. Dikar remembered their name. Mirrors.

Dikar grinned, thinking how excited Marilee got the first time she'd seen one. He mustn't think about Marilee! Not yet. Not till it didn't hurt so much to think about her.

Beside the mirrors, there were a comb and a bottle of the black water Walt had used to make Dikar's hair and beard black, that time last fall when Dikar kidnaped Major Benjamin Apgar, the American spy who for years had been on Hashamoto's staff.

Dikar hung the flashlight on a nail sticking out from the side of the truck. He fixed the mirrors, one on each wall of boxes, so that he could see the face and back of his head. Picking up the comb and the bottle of black water, he went to work on his hair and beard.

All the time he worked, the rumble of wheels went on underneath him, carrying him on into the night.

When he'd finished the job as well as he could, Dikar started to put on the green uniform. His legs got all tangled up in it, and he was thrown down as the truck went around a curve and bumped his head, but he got it fixed right at last.

He was glad they'd found out that a lot of the Abyssinians didn't wear shoes, because the uniform only made him feel uncomfortable and clumsy but with shoes on he would have been good for nothing.

Dikar fastened the belt around his waist and put the revolver into the pocket fixed on the belt to hold it. There was another pocket on the belt for a knife. Dikar put his own knife into it.

He bent and put into the box the limp sheath that Marilee had made for his knife, and the apron of plaited twigs that he'd brought from the Mountain. Lifting, Dikar saw in the mirror a tall, swart Abyssinian in Asafric green, black-bearded and scowling.

Underneath him the wheels rumbled, rolling faster and faster.

Dikar put the other things away into the box, the flashlight last. The dark that came when he thumbed the little button on its side seemed even blacker than before. He closed the side of the box, settled down on the floor, his back propped against the box on the other side.

He was very tired. He was so tired that the rolling rumble of the wheels blurred, was like the rush of a wide, dark river. . .

A loud snort woke him. The truck had stopped.

"What's up?" The soldier up front was frightened. "Cripes, Jordan, what's stopped us?"

CHAPTER IX

I'LL RIDE THE RIVER

"WHY—why'd you signal Cap Bennet?" the scared soldier babbled. "I don't see nothin'." Dikar could imagine him, staring wide-eyed into the dark, his hands tight on his gun. "I don't see nobody."

"Relax," the other man up there said. "There ain't nothin' to see. We're stopped because we're fresh out of gas, that's all."

"Out? You're nuts," the first one yelped. "I checked the gauge when we started an' it said—"

"Full tank. Sure. It says the same thing now an' we been running damn near all night. That gauge is jammed, Cal, an' the monkey was supposed to fill us up must of went by it."

Cal groaned. "What do we do now?"

"Ask the captain. Here he comes."

Dikar pushed himself to his feet, made sure the revolver and his knife were safe in the belt. Walt's voice came in to him, low but plain. "What's the trouble, men?"

Both talked at once, telling him.

"That's rank carelessness." Walt sounded awful mad. "Somebody will be sorry for it when I get back. But we can't hold up the whole convoy; I've got to get it to Cairo before daylight."

"Hey, Cap. How's about we siphon some gas out of each of the other tanks?"

"Mmmmm. No. It would take too long. Besides, they all might run out, if we do that. I guess we'll have to leave you—Oh damn! You men are supposed to go on to Betteville first thing in the morning. All right!" he snapped, as if he'd just made up his mind. "Here's how we'll work it.

"You two men go up to the lead truck and tell Sergeant Carnorvan I want him to take the other four trucks on to Cairo, and then find places in them for yourselves. I'll stay here and guard this one till you can send some gas back here to me. Get going!"

"Yes sir." Scraping noises from up front told Dikar that Jordan and the other soldier were getting off. He reached up, chinned himself to the top of the boxes. The space under the roof was a tight fit, on account of the uniform he had on now, but he managed to crawl through to the back end and squeeze down again to the floor.

A throb of motors beat against the truck. Faded. Gravel crunched outside, and knuckles thumped on the truck-door. Dikar twisted away the little board that held the door closed.

FRESH air was like a drink of cold water after the thick, stinking stuff he'd been breathing. There was still no moon but Walt's head and shoulders were plain against the paler dark.

Dikar dropped down alongside of him and said, "You did that good. The way you talked, those soldiers couldn't ever guess it was you that fixed things so they'd have to stop here."

"Yes," Walt chuckled, "the whole thing worked out swell. You've disappeared from camp and no one can possibly know which way you went, or how."

Dikar thought of something. "Hey! Won't the men who unload the truck wonder why the boxes are piled that way, with a big hole in the middle?"

"Nobody's going to unload it. I'm going to set it afire, and report that it was done by an Asafric patrol from whom I escaped by the skin of my teeth."

Dikar stiffened. "That's what Cal was scared of! The Blacks do prowl around here."

"Right enough. We're quite near their outposts here and every now and then some of them slip through our lines to do as much damage as they can, under cover of night.

"But the way you look, you'll have to worry more about being spotted by our friends rather than by the enemy. Which is why we'd better quit wasting time gabbing. Come on. I'll show you just where we are, so you can make what distance you can before daylight. This way."

They went around the end of the truck and abruptly Dikar stopped, pulling back against Walt's hand on his arm. "Wait!"

"Yes. We're in a town."

"But the noise the trucks made sure must have waked someone up. They'll see us."

"The trucks didn't wake anyone up, Dikar," Walt spoke in a queer, flat tone. "Take another look."

Dikar's eyes narrowed.

The houses didn't just look black because they stood against the sky. They were black, the black of charred wood. Not one of them had glass in its windows, or a whole roof.

Over here there were just two walls standing to make a corner. That gap, down there, wasn't a big garden but a tumbled heap of burned timbers. The high thing sticking up out of it was a chimney standing guard over the ashes of a home.

"No, Dikar. Our trucks couldn't make a loud enough noise to wake the people who sleep in those houses. They are the most fortunate of those who once lived here. The others—" Walt shrugged. "It's the old story. It's happened thousands of times in the last twelve years, all over America. Someone's capacity for endurance came to an end and he turned on his tormentor. His neighbors paid for his crime. . . . Come on over here. I want to show you something."

Dikar, stumbling along beside him, was too heartsick with thinking of what had happened here to watch or care where he was being led. "Look down there," Walt said, stopping him and pointing.

THE houses were just black sticks, leaning every which way, so you could look right through them. Looking through them, Dikar saw water, glinting faintly in the dark. The water was so wide Dikar could not see the land on its other side. It was a wide, dark river.

"The Mississippi," Walt said, "on its way to the Gulf of Mexico. Its flow will give you your direction."

"You've got a boat to take me down it, like the one you had to take me down the Hudson to New York, that time. I—"

"No, Dikar!" Walt broke in. "That would be sheer suicide. Maybe you could get down almost to Memphis without discovery—there's enough of the night left—but the Asafrics hold that city and all the territory below it.

"From there on down the river is crowded with their vessels, gunboats, freighters, all kinds of boats moving troops to and from garrisons, batches of slaves to the various plantations. You couldn't travel a hundred yards without being seen, and you have five hundred miles to go."

"Five hundred!" Muscles knotted under the skin of Dikar's face. "It would take me weeks on foot, Walt." His fingers dug into Walt's arm. "I'm goin down that river. I don't know how, but I've got to go down it to get to Yucatan in time, and so I'll find a way."

"By Jove," his friend said, softly. "I've

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Nureddin and I swung around a corner and saw Westfield, backed against a wall, threatened by Chinese with knives

Seven Isn't Lucky

It's an old Chinese custom: never wait for a natural to come up. Because in China it's the Sign of Mr. Seven; and Mr. Seven is poison—but definitely. From the lore of Nureddin Ali, the college student with the turban

By E. Hoffmann Price

Author of "Hindu Holiday," "Yaqui Gold," etc.

DOWN the tracks that run along the Embarcadero, a switch engine hissed and muttered. A foghorn *wooooooed,* and what few lights there were didn't count for the mist.

We bump-bumped over the rails that make Battery Street no more than a name on the map. I said to Nureddin Ali, "Anne is nuts if she thinks her old man came down here to sleep off a drunk."

Nureddin cocked his turban, but I didn't know whether he was listening, or just whiffing the air. His nose was thin and beaked, and now the nostrils flared and twitched a bit.

"Something burns. Not referring to your sentiments toward Anne Jordan."

"Me? Anne? Heck, she's just a customer."

We were idling along in one of my reconditioned and guaranteed cars; when I fix them up, you can't hear them and you can't smell them. I said, "Look here, just because you're trying to squirm out of signing on the dotted line, you don't need to rib this bus."

"I was thinking about the drunken watchman," Nureddin said. "Anne's father."

Then I got it: burned paint, at the Pacific & Asiatic Importing Company's warehouse, where old man Jordan punched the watchman's clock. I mean, where he'd used to make the rounds till he got fired.

Now, drunk and hostile, he was going back and punch the clock, whether or no; that's what Anne told me over the phone, breaking in just about the time Nureddin was getting ready to make a down payment.

She wanted me to find her dad before he got into a jam; and here I was. Anne is that kind of a girl, or maybe I'm that kind of a guy.

I swung right and bumped over some ties. About the time we were opposite the warehouse, we noticed a cream-colored Buick coupe parked at the loading dock.

My bus had a spotlight, which I trained down the alley. One of the side doors of the warehouse had a hole in it, a couple feet wide and maybe four feet high. That black blob against the gray paint was plain.

I began to understand the burned paint. Somebody must have used a cutting torch to slice a panel out of the door. My first thought was, "Anne sure will lift the roof if her old man is practicing up burglary."

The thing to do was to tell the cops but that was just what I wasn't doing, not until I made sure old man Jordan hadn't passed out, inside. Though that new Buick wasn't within a number of years or pounds of being Jordan's car.

So we went in, and that's how we met the corpse.

THE man was folded up on the asphalt emulsion floor, maybe three four yards inside. I couldn't get a good look at his face; there was too much blood on it. Someone had popped him a honey. The blunt instrument was a pinch bar, like you use for prying up box lids.

That poor fellow had an assortment of compound fractures that made me want to park my lunch.

His soft white hands were curled up. His gray suit was a mess, though it was pressed. His shoes were shined, and he wore a high grade wristwatch. The hat lying near a stack of rattan rice pockets must have cost fifteen bucks anyway.

Nureddin said, "Manifestly, this is not the night watchman."

Then he dipped into the coat pocket. There were two letters addressed to the Pacific & Asiatic Import Company. One was marked for the attention of Mr. W. F. Westfield.

Then there was a wallet with a driver's license. That settled another detail: the dead man was Hewitt Barclay, aged 47, weight 165, and he lived out in St. Francis Wood.

Nureddin slipped the stuff back into the pocket and snapped on the lights. The warehouse reached from Battery Street to Sansome; all brick, with no ventilation to speak of. There was a smell of fish, ginger, tung oil, and dried shrimp.

In one corner were cases of *ng ka pay,* which is Chinese rice brandy that tastes like orange shellac blended with rubber. Between Sumatra tobacco, Persian dates, bars of Banka tin, and Chinese groceries, Pacific & Asiatic covered the field.

Nureddin was interested in the cut in the iron door. It was a ragged job, and in spots the metal had foamed and boiled.

For maybe a sixteenth of an inch, the paint was completely gone; then a quarter of an inch of paint with all the life baked out of it, powdery, white-and-yellow. That's a smell that lasts long and carries far.

Just outside the hole, and a bit to one side, was the piece that had been taken out.

Up front, on a sort of mezzanine floor, was a glassed-in office; steps led to it, from the front entrance. I headed for the phone, and when I got to the foot of the stairs, I saw that the front door was unlocked. A key was still in place, and a ring with other keys dangled from it.

When I reached the mezzanine, I planted myself at a golden oak desk marked *Mr. Barclay* and dialed the cops. There was a private office marked *Mr. Westfield.* A third desk was marked, *Chief Clerk.*

The man at police headquarters wasn't impressed by another corpse along the Embarcadero, not even when I told him whose it was. But I'd barely gotten down from the mezzanine when I heard a siren howling its head off.

Nureddin said, "If you drive me back to Berkeley, I'll tell you something interesting."

HE was studying engineering, and he lived at International House, along with a bunch of other Arabs, a few Turks, and some Chinese; the foreign contingent coming to U.C. for super-education.

So I said, "Sure, but what is so damn —hey, who pays the bridge tolls? And are you buying this reconditioned and guaranteed?"

Nureddin yawned. "Haste is of Satan. Easy to buy, hard to sell."

"Are you telling me? Here I try to sell old man Jordan a new used bus, and he gets fired. I'm trying to sell Anne one, and she says all her boy friends have cars."

"They do, do they not?"

"Sure, and she has lots of them. Boy friends."

"So you neglect me, a customer, and go out to find her poor, drunken father. And you find a corpse. Now, this interesting thing I promised to tell you."

"I guess you'll say this is a warehouse robbery?"

Nureddin nodded, and patted his white turban into shape; though it always did look like it was die-cast. He wore an emerald ring with a stone in it the size of a Muscat grape; so big that you'd take it for a phoney. Shah Jahan, Emperor of India, gave it to one of the Nureddin family about three hundred years ago, and it hasn't been in the hands of a pawnbroker since then.

"Warehouse robbery, yes. The odd feature is, the thief took ten cases of green apricots in spiced syrup. Worth about six dollars a case, retail."

Before I could ask him how he figured everything out, including the flavor of the syrup, the cops piled in. An ambulance pulled up.

Two press men got busy with flash bulbs, and the police camera man got busy. The photographers got pictures of everything but each other. In the meanwhile, Nureddin and I were answering questions.

The cops don't like fellows with turbans, first because hats are the fashion, and second, because there have been thirty-four Hindu murders in California, all but one of them unsolved; Nureddin Ali having uncorked that one, last summer.

However, these brave lads in blue didn't know him; one said to his buddy, "Another one of these damn Hindus." He turned to Nureddin and said, "All right, you savvy English? Whatcher name?"

"I am Sayyied Nureddin Ali al Mamoun ibn Ghazi. Is spelling included in the police manual?"

That got a hand from everyone but the gent with the notebook, and he said, "Never mind the wisecracks."

They finally got him catalogued as N. Ali, student, U.C.

My name was easy enough. "Dean Webber, huh? Dean of what?"

"Reconditioned and guaranteed cars."

"Huh?"

"I'm no professor, much less a dean of anything. It started this way: Anne Jordan—that's the watchman's daughter —asked me to find her dad."

"Where is he?"

"Haven't found him yet. All I found was this dead guy." I didn't look down.

There was no chance of stalling. Every time I tried it, they headed me off. You'd have thought they thought I'd conked Barclay.

Then Nureddin cut in, "Pardon me, officer. My friend is confused. Miss Jordan's father was—ah—quite swacked, despondent, you might say, at having been dismissed.

"Fired is the word, I think. A week ago. And he insisted on coming to the warehouse."

I shouted him down, "He's whacky, Sergeant; he doesn't know a thing about it."

Nureddin raised the hand with the emerald. "As I was saying, Sergeant, I was in Mr. Webber's office when she phoned, and that was my understanding.

"Miss Jordan seemed to fear that her poor, drunken father might insist on walking his beat anyway, and he'd get into trouble. That was my understanding. Mr. Webber very kindly agreed to find him. I came along."

The sergeant turned on me. "What the hell's the idea of holding out?"

"Between you and him, I haven't had a chance to answer anything. Am I a mind reader; do I know what the gal had on her mind, weeping into the phone? Why wouldn't I do her a favor? I been trying to sell her a car the last three months."

BEFORE we got through, Nureddin's story was a matter of record. When I finally stepped out into the nice, cool fog, I remembered I'd forgotten something: that quip he'd made about green apricots in syrup.

I said, "I have half a notion to tell them what you held out. What was the idea of spilling the beans about the old man being drunk and hostile and cussing the boss?"

Nureddin twisted the dash lighter and touched off a cigarette before he answered, "It is this way, Dean. They will hunt the old man, and that will save you many gallons of fuel."

"Many, my eye, this bus gives 18 per gallon in traffic."

I don't think he believed me. He just said, "Another thing, they'll suspect him. The girl will be worried silly, as the saying goes."

I wanted to sock him, but sometimes he was a nice fellow, and he might be a customer some day. "That's just it, you heel. She's a swell gal, she's a honey. And her old man is a good guy, and he used to have a big job before he went busted."

Nureddin had an answer: "They will suspect Mr. Jordan, but they can't prove a thing, mainly because he is innocent. Even the police will finally admit that."

"That poor kid is half screwy from worry!"

"When you have cleared her father," he calmly went on, "she will be so grateful that she will buy a reconditioned and guaranteed car."

I stared.

"Me, clear him?"

"Well, perhaps not you. This whole business is fascinating. A man getting an oxy-acetylene torch to cut a hole into a warehouse to steal ten cases of green apricots in spiced syrup. Have you ever eaten them?"

"Sounds like cholera morbus to me."

Anything to humor a customer, though Nureddin was the slipperiest I'd found in many a year. So I swung up Pacific Street, and through the refined Barbary so-called Coast.

For a wonder we found a parking spot on the main stem of Chinatown; to buy

green apricots, while Anne was depending on me to locate her drunken dad.

II

CHINATOWN has more neon lights than any section of Frisco, except maybe Mission Street. We hoofed it down the narrow main stem, Nureddin looking into the windows where they had bottles of *ng ka pay*, and dried horn toads, and gentian root. Finally he saw a place that looked right.

A minute later, he came out with a can of green apricots in spiced syrup, and he said, "Now let us see Anne Jordan."

Anne and her dad lived out on San José Avenue. I headed up the California Street hill in high, which is swell even for a new car. It didn't take us long before we were rolling along through a section of little houses with their fronts jammed right on the sidewalk, and their sides wedged against each other.

I'd barely pulled up when Anne busted out of the house. She was streamlined and blonde, and the light in the doorway put a glitter in her hair. She ran to meet me, to give me a hand with her dad.

Her face changed when she saw me clumping up the stairs, with a guy in a turban following me. Anne looked puzzled and hurt, and she said, "Where—"

"We couldn't find him." I stepped to one side to make way for Nureddin. "We been looking for him, at the warehouse."

Nureddin sized her up for a second: the wide blue eyes, the nice curves under the blue robe, the slim ankles. He said, "After what happened, Miss Jordan, it is just as well that he was not at the warehouse."

"This is Nureddin Ali," I told her. "Maybe he won't gripe you."

She spent a couple seconds looking at the lean Arab from India. "Tell me about it; I'm worried, Mr. Ali."

We followed her into the little white shack, and parked ourselves in the living room, which was too small for the old and solid furniture she'd salvaged.

There was a Persian carpet, worn thin, like some they have in museums. Too big for the room, but class all over.

First time I'd ever been in her house, and I began to understand how come her dad would get swacked, just thinking too much. He'd had big jobs at one time, and getting fired from a warehouse would get under his skin.

Nureddin set the can of apricots on a tabouret of carved teak. "We know you are worried," he said. "Perhaps I can help you. Why was your father dismissed?"

She twisted a handkerchief. "They said that they didn't need a watchman, that he was a useless expense, that the war had upset the importing business, that there wasn't anything in the warehouse that needed watching anyway, nothing but Chinese groceries, and all sorts of odds and ends like that. But where is he?"

"We were there, and we didn't find him." I got a chance to say that much. "For all we know, he wasn't there at all."

Anne was getting impatient. "You're not telling me everything!"

Nureddin hefted the can of apricots. "These are packed in Canton. By Yee Jun and Company."

Anne was ready to scream, but something about his purring kept her from cracking off. I said, "The warehouse was busted into and robbed tonight, Anne. They stole ten cases of these things."

Anne brightened up a little, and relaxed. "Oh. Then maybe dad will get his job back. Being fired made him feel useless. We don't *need* his salary; I earn enough at Vernier's, but that's not the point."

Nureddin looked at the clock, saw it was eleven, and spun the radio dial. "A man was killed. Mr. Barclay, one of the partners. That is why we came out."

RIGHT on the second, the news commentator chimed in, telling about the war. Anne cracked off, "Oh, how terrible!" Then her face got tense.

"Mr. Barclay—killed—Mr. Barclay—fired dad—" She grabbed my arm. "How—what did happen? Have they got him?"

"He wasn't there. We found Barclay. But they're looking for your father."

She looked at the radio. "Is that why you turned it on?"

Nureddin nodded. "The police jumped at conclusions. They would want to find him. We had to explain our presence, you understand. In the meanwhile, we wondered about the strange loot. Green apricots in—"

He picked up the can and looked at the lithographed label, with green fruit and Chinese chicken tracks in red. "In spiced syrup. Are you sure your father was dismissed just to save expenses?"

He smiled that slow smile that never told you anything. "Loot, and not worth the trouble. Maybe he knew something that Mr. Barclay did not want known. May I have a can opener?"

She got up; he had a way of making people fall in line with his ideas. At the door leading into the next room, she stopped and asked, "You mean, there might be smuggling? Opium, for instance? And they fired him because he had a suspicion?"

Nureddin patted his turban. "Right now, I couldn't make a better guess, nor a worse one."

The news broadcast told all about the bombs in London. Anne's heels ticktacked through the dining room, toward the kitchen. Nureddin eyed the old Persian carpet, so old it didn't have a bit of nap left, and it was patched in spots.

"A real Feraghan," he said; and the way he said the words told me it was like a Rolls Royce. "Do you know, that young lady has made a very decent guess, half right, half wrong."

"How do you know they stole apricots?"

"That asphalt emulsion floor is soft. While you were in the office calling the police, I looked at the marks. The weight of a stack of boxes had made indentations in the soft paving. I could read the prints, the traces of the lettering painted on the boxes.

"They had been removed recently, after standing there quite a while. The dust on the rest of the floor made the clean squares stand out."

Nureddin never skipped anything. But I found one hole in that. "Hell, suppose they'd sold the stuff that afternoon?"

"Would the warehouseman make a trail in the dust, leading from the pile to the hole in the door? It was an old door, one they had not used for a long time. The loading dock where trucks pull up is on the Filbert Street side, not on the alley side."

He was so slick it griped me. "All right, you read prints of box markings transferred to asphalt that'd gotten soft under a low roof on a hot day, and so you made apricots out of it. How'd you know there were ten cases?"

"That pillar," he explained. "There was a dust mark between each two boxes. You see, they had been stacked there for some time."

ANNE came in with a can opener. Nureddin set to work. The syrup was spicy smelling; the apricots were grass green. He speared one with the point of the can opener, offered it to Anne. She shook her head, for the radio had a hold on her. I took a bite.

It was hard as a gourd, and crisp; it had the pit in it. But it wasn't bad eating once you got used to it. "I wouldn't kill a man for ten cases of these."

"No one else would."

Then the police report came in from the news broadcast. Anne said, "Oh, Lord," and jerked back. They had found her old man in his parked car, at the foot of Clay Street, near Drumm.

He couldn't account for anything, and said that for the past two-three hours he had sat there. No one knew what he'd done since leaving the Scandanavia Saloon, where he'd finished getting liquored up.

Two-three hours alone. That was Jordan's story.

Anne was white as paper. "I'm getting a lawyer. I'm going down to see him. Drive me down, I'll be dressed in a minute."

Nureddin said, "They will try to make him tell where he got a cylinder of acetylene, a cylinder of oxygen, a cutting torch. And where he put them, and where he hid ten cases of apricots after he killed Mr. Barclay. They will keep asking him. Just tell your father to speak only the truth, Miss Jordan."

"Hey, how'd the cops know about the 'cots? You didn't tell, I didn't."

"But the chief clerk and the inevitable inventory would tell, or the surviving partner," Nureddin said, without even a split-second pause. "So, Miss Jordan, just tell your father not to speak other than the truth."

"What else would he speak?" she flared up.

He raised the hand with the emperor's emerald. "It is very hard for a man to keep to a truth that no one will believe. He is the handiest suspect. He has a motive, he was drunk and angry. So they will force the facts to fit the easiest way, being human."

ANNE eased up. "I'm glad you said that. I might have believed—believed that Dad did do something wild. Is it hard to get acetylene and the rest?"

Nureddin was an engineer, and I had used the stuff for cutting up old cars for junk. We both knew the answers, but for once I beat him to it.

"They're easy to get, Anne; anyone can buy them, steal them from a construction job. But they weigh about a hundred pounds apiece, and then there are the gadgets and the torch and the hose that goes with the outfit. Hauling them around is a chore, hiding them is another."

"Why—" She stopped at the bedroom door. "Why, it's silly, thinking that a groggy man could do a job like that. The fools!"

When she closed the door, Nureddin said to me, "Maybe I can furnish another suspect. Before they beat a confession out of Mr. Jordan."

"Huh! That crusty old buzzard—they'll have to work a week to wear him down."

"That is good." Nureddin drew his finger tips across his palm. "Before the police have finished proving Mr. Jordan did the work, I will have a chance to speak to—well, the dead man's partner, his chief clerk. Perhaps to some of my Chinese friends.

"I still do not think that this old man cut a warehouse open and killed one of

his employers just to prove that a watchman's services are indispensible."

"Neither do I; but that's still more motive, proving it was crazy to fire him. Maybe Barclay dropped in. Remember that key hanging in the door? And surprised him, and Jordan conked him, and then cooled off.

"And then got stinking drunk, the way I might do after killing a man when I'd just intended to sock him one for general indignation."

You couldn't blame the cops for trying to make that shoe fit. The uselessness of the loot—the point I'd figured would prove old man Jordan couldn't have done the job—was what really made it all the worse.

Nureddin said, "Tomorrow, we go to Chinatown to ask about green apricots. And about the partners."

"Huh! You'll get plenty out of Chinamen."

He struck light to a cigarette, and his brows twitched like devilish little wings. "*Making* Chinese talk is impossible, but persuasion—"

Then Anne came out, all dressed, with a handbag tucked under her arm. She smiled, and caught my arm, and Nureddin's. "I heard every word of it, and somehow you make it sound worse, and sound better."

III

THE morning paper got it all nicely boiled down, with old man Jordan unanimously elected. When I drove Anne down to the big, smoke-stained Hall of Justice on Kearney Street, the night of the murder, I had intended to wait outside while she talked to her dad; but Nureddin horned in, for all that I gave him a dirty look and nudged him.

Let the gal talk to her dad without an audience. But Nureddin made a smooth job of it, and she insisted on him tagging along through the creosote smell of that old jug. Well, what'd I do but tag along, too.

Jordan was still groggy, but he knew what the score was. He was big and square-rigged, with shaggy gray brows and wiry gray hair, and his close-cropped mustache was bristly.

The turnkey let Anne into the cell. Nureddin and I stayed in the corridor.

The old man said, "I've been a plain fool, but don't you worry."

Anne was crying a little. She sat beside him on that iron-latticed bunk with the crummy blankets spread over it, and put one arm over his square shoulders. "Dad, I know you didn't do it, I've got a lawyer on the way. Can't you remember what you did, where you went?"

He snorted, and straightened up. "Who are those fellows?"

"Mr. Webber and Mr. Ali. They drove me down. They'll help me."

"Private detective? The other one, I mean.

"No," Nureddin cut in. "I'm an engineer." He took my flashlight out of his pocket. "Mr. Jordan, will you please stretch your legs out, so I can look at your shoes?"

Jordan gave him a funny look, then chuckled. "Go ahead. You won't find any Filbert Street dirt on them. I wasn't there; I got swacked and forgot it. Till they found me parked and snoring."

The flash played around Jordan's square-toed shoes; they were black, half-soled, and had a good shine.

Then the light shifted to the blue worsted pants. Threadbare, but pressed; a nail snag, stitched so you could hardly see it. The pants hadn't dragged dirt from his heels. Nureddin squinted, and said, "No cuffs." He straightened up then.

Jordan frowned. "And shiny at the knees, young man."

Nureddin looked him in the eye, smiled, snapped off the light. "I'm quite convinced you did not kill Mr. Barclay." He bowed from the hips, and touched his forehead with his fingertips; somehow, that did not look stagey.

"Good luck, sir. We will wait outside."

Which we did. And looking back at all that, the following morning, while I tossed off some Java along with the paper, I wondered what Nureddin had seen about Jordan's pants and shoes that the cops had skipped.

I phoned Anne. When she said that the lawyer was sure the grand jury wouldn't bring an indictment, she sounded like she'd been awake all night.

"Don't strike me you're much impressed with the mouthpiece's optimism, honey. Don't let it get you down; he wouldn't get a preliminary hearing till this afternoon, and he may not even be bound over to the grand jury."

I got that sigh over the wire. "Oh, he's all right. Only it's not his father, it's just a client. Thanks for calling, but I do have to hurry to work."

"Work?"

"Win, lose, or draw, this will take money." Her laugh was a brave stab at being cheerful. "How much do you bid for dad's car? Well, I don't think they'll let me out for being a notorious man's daughter."

She hung up. Lucky Anne wasn't working in a place where she had to meet the public, or they'd have had to sack her, like that dame in the beauty parlor; the customers came to gawk and not to get finger waves.

But Anne was private secretary to a box manufacturer, so having her picture on the front page didn't hurt her, not much.

I looked at the paper. She was a camera man's treat. If she'd knocked Barclay off herself, she'd be signing on the line for a floorshow or something.

THAT day, I muffed a couple of push-over sales. I told a joy rider to go climb a tree, and an hour later he drove past bearing down on the horn of a bus he'd bought next door. He wasn't a joy-rider after all.

Either I was losing my grip or I was worried about Anne.

Finally I turned the place over to my left-hand man—me being the right hand, and that all thumbs—and called Nureddin, at International House.

He'd left a call for me, not wanting to break in on business. He wanted me to meet him in Chinatown, at Pagoda Place, to watch a Chinese funeral, of all things.

I parked near the Three Dragons on Jackson Street. The air was thick with the smoke of black powder. Someone was sawing on a *sam-yin*, a sort of fiddle that sounds like a tortured cat.

Gongs were whanging away like crazy, and a little old Chinaman was pasting strips of bright red flimsy on the dirty brick wall at the corner of Jackson and the alley.

Then I jumped and ducked for cover, but it was just the start of a firecracker barrage. A couple Chinese dames gave me a merry laugh. The whole alley began crackling like a bunch of machine guns had gone crazy. Nothing but part of the fixing for an old style funeral.

And everyone going to the preliminaries gets slices of bacon boiled in sugar syrup, and candied water lily roots and maybe a silk handkerchief.

Nureddin's white turban stood out like a torch light parade in that murky alley. I dodged a street car, danced over the slippery cobblestones, and asked him, "Who's dead and what is it to us?"

He handed me an early edition, and pointed. "Kwong Li committed suicide. He is now enjoying"—Nureddin's deep set eyes had a laugh in them—"a lavish funeral. I am full of almond wafers and candied kumquats and tea and—"

"That's not all you're full of. Eating candy while they're hanging old man Jordan. You act like you're tickled about Kwong Li's doing the Dutch act. What have you got against him?"

LOTS of people had plenty against Kwong Li. Next to dog stories and kid stories for human interest, the papers love Chinee stuff. And Kwong Li had spent forty years being advertised as the slickest, crookedest, smilingest slant-eye in all the thirty thousand Mongolians of Chinatown.

G-men had broken their hearts trying to prove he smuggled hop, girls, and aliens. You might not know who the Mayor of Frisco was, but you'd be sure who Kwong Li was.

Remember the time he was getting shaved? Two highbinders came in with hatchets. Before they got one cut at him, he pulled a short-barreled .41 from under his bib and blew them both back on their rumps, and then made the barber carry on.

He always padded around in his shoes with the inch-thick felt soles, his skinny old hands hidden in his sleeves. He said he was a "Klistian Chinaman."

The foxy old buzzard used to give candy to the white kids that came with their folks to see Chinatown. He paid off debts for busted gamblers. He was easy copy for feature writers, and they loved him; no wonder there was a big blurb about the "eccentric and lovable son of Confucius who suicided early this afternoon."

But I still didn't see what they had to do with Anne's dad.

Nureddin said, "The surviving partner of Pacific & Asiatics will be here before the obsequies are over. He has to be. The company had Chinese customers. Look, he's pulling up now."

A car door slammed. A tall man in a dark topcoat was heading for the alley. He had a big beak of a nose, a tanned face, and slightly popping eyes; they looked awfully tired and worried. His mouth was unsteady, and a bit loose. His chin didn't match that he-man face.

Nureddin said, "There was no partnership insurance. I cut school today and found that out, among other things."

Westfield edged in through the crowd of Chinese, and we followed him up the stairs where the corpse waited. As we reached the second floor, I saw that the loft was jammed with lean Chinks, with chubby Chinks, with Chinks in silk jackets and caps, and with young squirts in store clothes.

Boys circulated around offering cakes and drinks. Candles three inches thick and a couple feet high stood in rows at the far end.

The coffin was on a trestle, and the smoke of joss-sticks made the air blue.

Even if you could understand Chinese, that screeching *sam yin*, that *plink-plonk-plank* of a flat-backed mandolin, the tomtoms and the gongs would have knocked every word out of shape.

The men who filed past the coffin all stopped at the head and bowed to the young man who stood there, clasping his own two hands and returning the bows.

THAT coffin was built like a battleship. The planks had to be heavy or they

couldn't have been carved so deep. You couldn't tell what kind of wood it was, for every inch of it was painted red, and decorated in gilt.

I tiptoed, and looked over those hats and little silk caps. They kept them on as a mark of respect. I'd forgotten myself, so I put mine back on.

The coffin planks were three inches thick, anyway. I couldn't see the corpse, except just a bit of yellow face, a million wrinkles, a shriveled mouth. And that mouth gave me the creeps.

I yelled in Nureddin's ear, "That old buzzard is laughing at something; he's played a dirty joke on someone. I bet he committed suicide to spite someone, to bring 'em tough luck."

"So you believe that, too?" He did not yell, but his voice ate right through all the noise.

He was ribbing me for a boob. "Hell, I read they do that, dive off to put a curse on an enemy."

He caught my elbow, and I looked. Westfield, hat on where it belonged, formed an alley in the crowd. They melted away. He didn't touch a man, not even with his sleeve.

I said, "I'm getting a close look. Kwong Li is snickering; no one ever beat him alive, no one beats him when he's dead."

"Don't," Nureddin said. "You can't get near."

But I tried.

I still don't know how they did it. Nobody shoved me around. Nobody prodded me. But a solid mass of Chinamen blocked me.

I said there were dozens of them. There must have been a hundred, popping up from nowhere, with little glasses of wine, cups of tea, cookies. They didn't seem to see me or know I was there, but I did not want to shake a tea cup out of anyone's hand, and rile them.

Before I knew what was going on, I was back a dozen feet where I belonged, I guess.

Nureddin had a silent laugh.

Westfield was bowing, Chinese fashion. The young man by the coffin was bowing. The yellow wave shifted, and the two were edged toward a door I hadn't noticed.

I caught one look of Westfield's face; he was gulping like a fish out of water.

I followed Nureddin to the entrance. An old man gave me a white silk handkerchief, and I said thank you. He didn't give Nureddin one; you don't get seconds.

When we got down to the street, the Arab said, "Shake the fire-cracker paper from your shoes, and take me for a drive."

"Hey, I was going to see Anne."

"Later, yes. But now, take me to Westfield's house. Like his late partner, he lives in St. Francis Wood."

"What in hell has this funeral got to do with old man Jordan?"

"I think that the answer to Barclay's death lies somewhere between Kwong Li and Mr. Westfield. Let me drive, while you read Westfield's statement in the paper.

"Just read, and ignore police guesses as to whether acetylene and oxygen stolen from the construction job on Third Street was used to cut open Pacific & Asiatic Warehouse.

"Answer there is, probably yes, but definitely irrelevant."

IV

WHILE Nureddin booted that reconditioned and guaranteed over Twin Peaks, I managed to read, but sometimes I skipped a line, mainly from wondering whether to jump, or stick with the roller coaster.

But I did get Westfield's statement before we zoomed down the far side, and into the madhouse of horseshoe streets in St. Francis Wood.

Barclay, he said, had hollered on account of the Asiatic unpleasantness playing hell with the import and export business, and claimed they ought to cut down expenses by firing the watchman and the chief clerk.

After all, Westfield claimed, you didn't need a watchman to guard groceries and such like; it wasn't like a bank or jewelery store. The warehouse was fireproof, and it had looked theft-proof, too.

Taking a bunch of apricots? Cockeyed; no Chinese angle at all, just a sour puss old man trying to prove his job shouldn't have been eliminated.

While Nureddin was nosing into one of the gateways that give the exclusive touch to the section just off Portola Boulevard, I said to him, "Hell, this is all static; we know all this."

He set the parking brake. "Correction, please. This afternoon I talked to the widow, Mrs. Barclay, and she insists her late husband was against firing the watchman; that he was annoyed at his partner's insistence."

"That makes Westfield a liar."

"Very concise. Unless newspaper men made a mistake, and misquoted him. The widow also said that business was not bad, but that Westfield had overdrawn his account. He played the races."

If it hadn't been for the hole in the door, and the missing apricots, I'd have said, "Westfield got called for pulling too much dough from the till, and he conked his partner."

But it was a cinch that he'd not have had time to dash out for a couple hundred pounds of gas tanks and cutting equipment to fake a robbery, *after* he'd killed Barclay in a sudden wrangle.

THAT pinch bar did make it look like a sudden brawl, not a planned job. Yet the cutting torch angle wasn't spur of the moment. I still had Chinese funerals on the brain when I asked, "Quizzing Westfield's wife?"

"No." Nureddin headed up the grade. "Mrs. Westfield is indefinitely away from home. I hope I was not misinformed, or she will be startled."

"She will? We will, pal. I do not like this a bit."

Nureddin jingled a bunch of keys. He stalked along, easy as if he owned the whole district. Lights winked among the trees, and chauffeurs tooled big Cads and Packards around the curves.

He said, "A man living here would lose face if he had to move to quarters like Anne Jordan's. He would go far to keep from leaving.

"Now be casual. We go in by the front door. That makes it an honest mistake."

The house had white pillars, and sat well back on a terrace. There were oaks and conifers, and some acacias. A broad drive made a loop in front of the house; a branch led to the garage.

Nureddin stepped to the door, and tried a key. He did not waste any time with that one, nor with the second. The third one kept him entertained; I could hear the metal whispering and grating as he fooled around.

Then the bolt slid, and he walked in. He found a switch, and snapped it. I was sweating and uncomfortable, but it's hard to run out when the other fellow is so cool.

Stairs led to the second floor. To the left of the vestibule was a long living room with hardwood floor that had a thin coat of dust over its polish. There was a grand piano, and some scatter rugs. Beyond that, a breakfast room and sun parlor.

We backtracked, and headed up the carpeted stairs. Nureddin skipped the first two bedrooms, whose furnishings were covered, and stepped into the third.

He glanced at the walnut dresser and then opened a clothes closet. He looked at all the shoes; most of them were on trees. Then he looked at the suits, and I wondered what for. It was something like his way of going over old man Jordan's shoes and pants.

He didn't say anything, and his poker face told me nothing.

Maybe he was looking for bits of scattered brain and drops of blood? It takes a good cleaning to get every trace. But I was too jittery to ask or argue. They usually have private watchmen in these deluxe corners of town, even early in the evening.

Nureddin pointed toward a room with an acre of windows, facing to the back, and over the rooftops of houses further down grade. It was a library, furnished with a walnut desk and a lounge.

On the desk was a red piece of paper with one Chinese character done in black. A thumbtack held it down. Near it was a white rooster with a sliced throat. Fresh blood spattered the desk top and the floor, and the chair.

"Fu Manchu coming to town, huh?" That fell flat as beer on a plate. "What kind of a game is this?"

I KNEW damn well it was no game. Leaving this dump looked better every minute. A Chinese delegation had beaten us to it by not much time.

I began to think of that yellow wave that edged Westfield to the back room at the funeral. All of a sudden, I knew that we'd watched a pattern shaping up, and not just accidental trifles.

"Killing a white rooster," Nureddin said, "is one of the first steps to putting a curse on a man. They do it in Burma. In the Malay States. In the Chinese secret societies. Someone is not playing."

"Can you read that brush-splashing?"

"That happens to be one of the few characters I do know. It is a number."

"Westfield's, I guess. Chinese humor."

"That is seven. It means completion, the end, the fullness: which is what death is for every man. It also means traitor. Ah-Tsat, 'Mr. Seven', is the name they give what you call a double-crosser.

"This may be only a warning, or it may be a sentence. I wonder what Westfield will say when he sees what has been put on his desk while he attended a funeral."

"I'm not waiting to listen." Then I heard footsteps below, a mutter of people trying to talk in an undertone and making a hash of it. "What'll we do, duck, or hide in a closet, or—"

"Shhh!" He listened a second, and shook my hand off his arm. There were sounds from the back; a scratching at a screen. "They always surround a place."

He snapped off the switch in the study. As he strolled down the hall toward the stairs, he sounded off, "No, I do not care for this place. Quite too big. That fool of an agent."

Maybe that gag would work—pretending we were looking over a house advertised for rent. So I adlibbed, "What in hell's wrong with it, ain't it furnished?"

There weren't any more sounds below; and my guess was, neither were there any ways of dodging a squad of cops. A licensed private detective might get away with this, but not us two eggs.

Then I felt someone looking holes into

my back. I turned. Nothing but an open bathroom door; but in the medicine cabinet mirror I saw the reflection of the Chinaman peeping past the edge of a shower curtain. The glass picked him out, behind the gathered folds that had been slid to one end of the stall; otherwise I'd never have seen him.

In the meanwhile, Nureddin wrangled his way to the foot of the stairs.

There was a cop below; a private patrol cop. He wore khaki, and a gun, the last being in his hand. A crusty bird, and his face looked like he knew he packed a lot of weight.

"All right, I guess you're a meter reader, eh? How'd you get in?"

Nureddin looked at him a second or so. "With a key. What is the trouble, officer?"

The cop didn't know what to think. Who would have, with that calm fellow wearing a turban and an easy smile?

"Trouble for you, wise guy! Walking into a private residence."

"A furnished house," Nureddin said, as if correcting a half witted boy. "Did you rent your house without looking at it?"

"Huh?"

"Wait, let me show you." He dug a newspaper clipping out of his pocket, and also a key which had a real estate agent's tag on it. "You might try calling Crawford & Canning and ask them if Nureddin Ali did or did not leave a deposit for keys to inspect a house."

The tag had Westfield's address and the street number.

THE cop didn't know whether he'd made a mistake or not. He said, "Hell, this is Westfield's house. He didn't tell me he was sub-leasing. I saw him last night."

"The agent did not say whose house it was. I was not interested."

Nureddin twirled the key. The cop stepped to the phone, called Crawford & Canning. He ended by getting one of the firm at a residence number. He asked, "You give a key to a Turk or Hindu?"

Whatever the answer was, he grunted, slammed the receiver,. "All right, all right. It's my job, Mr. Ali, just my job."

Nureddin was nice about it. "If I should move in here, I'll remember your vigilance. Who is at the rear?"

"Neighbor's chauffeur. He saw you and called me."

When we got shed of him, and locked the door behind us—though not with the key we'd offered the cop—I said, "One more like that and I'm through. Suppose he'd tried the key?"

"But he didn't, because I put him in the wrong, and from the start. There really is a place for rent in this block. Nobody but a resident ever does get the numbers straight out here. So I got a key for that place."

Well, it had worked. I changed the subject. "There was a Chinaman hiding in the first bathroom."

"I saw him. A clever fellow. He got in without being noticed."

There was a hidden laugh in his voice, and he went on, "No, they didn't see him; they merely saw us."

"Look here, you sound as if that's swell."

When we reached the car, he answered, "It is just as you say. The policeman will start thinking, and he will ask Westfield. Or the chauffeur will start talking. In the meanwhile Westfield will have found the Sign of Mr. Seven.

"I think that he will tell the police that he expected people to inspect the house. Also, he may be looking for us."

"I hope nobody else does!"

"He will. I caught his eye up there at the funeral. A turban is conspicuous, you know."

"So you're gunning for Westfield? You mean he did knock off Barclay?"

As I made a U-turn, he answered, "Westfield and the late Kwong Li were engaged in smuggling, using the Pacific & Asiatic Import Company as a front. A can of apricots need not assay one hundred percent fruit."

It began to make sense, but Nureddin's trick of pulling things out of air griped me all over. "I guess Kwong Li's family just up and told you the old man was smuggling hop or something?"

Nureddin said, "I am a Moslem from Hindustan. However, there are twenty million Chinese Moslems, and Islam is one of the greatest fraternities in the world.

"You understand, I could hardly go to the police to accuse Westfield of smuggling. It would cause casualties among the Chinese Moslem friends who trusted my discretion.

"We do not want any more Mr. Sevens."

V

ASSUMING Nureddin was right about the smuggling, this business made sense. Fill those apricot cans with opium, and you'd have something. And the Sign of Mr. Seven: Ah-Tsat, traitor. Where'd a double-cross come in except if one partner grabbed all the loot instead of divvying up?

We had nothing to do but catch Westfield with the ten cases of apricots to prove he had killed Hewitt Barclay, or that he knew who had.

I said something like that.

Nureddin wouldn't say yes or no, but he admitted, "If Westfield has loot he should have shared with Kwong Li, he would hardly dare keep it in his house. We cannot wait for him to go to get the plunder. If he is wise, he will let it lie for a long while.

"Indeed, with a murder to complicate things, an unpremeditated murder, he might never go after the apricot cans."

"I see you got my point."

He missed that sarcasm. "So, I must make him get the plunder at once. I think Kwong Li has similar aims."

"Huh? He's dead."

That funny smile again; I wanted to sock him. "I meant the heirs and assignees of the late Kwong Li. Absurd of me, after having seen the coffin."

"That suicide don't make sense."

"Turn here," he cut in. "We want to see Mrs. Hewitt Barclay. I would like to persuade her to let me manage her interest in the Pacific & Asiatic Import Company."

This was a hot one. "Get me a job, too. Now, Kwong Li was double-crossed, so he kills himself."

"In Chinese, that makes sense. The old man knew that such an act would make it a point of honor for all his tong brothers and relatives to hound Ah-Tsat, the Traitor, to death or to restitution."

The Chinese are funny that way. I remember hearing of condemned bandits paying a man to take their place under the head-lifting sword. The substitute's family got the dough and became independent for life. The old clan spirit.

ANOTHER winding block, and we parked in front of the late Hewitt Barclay's house, a brick job with a steep English style roof.

Mrs. Barclay had pulled herself together. She was a swell-looking widow, not a day over thirty-five, and she had a very elegant way of wearing black.

Her hair was dark, and her skin was white and clear; hardly a touch of make-up, and not a speck of jewelry on those long, slim hands, except a platinum wedding ring.

That gilt-edged Louie Something furniture managed not to fold up when I sat down.

She shushed Nureddin when he apologized for intruding again.

"I'm only too glad to help you, Mr. Ali, and I do hope you can find something in favor of that poor old watchman. I can't believe he killed Hewitt."

"I had something else in mind. Could you, if you so desired, buy Mr. Westfield's interest in the company? I mean, would it be plausible; would it seem bona fide if you offered to buy?"

"Why—really now, I'm sure I don't understand. Why should I buy?"

"Because the partnership is dissolved. He would buy you out."

"Which would be better."

She was still amazed at Nureddin taking a hand in her affairs, but that didn't bother him. "Pardon me, Mrs. Barclay, that would be worse. However you feel about getting away from such tragic associations, you must offer to buy Westfield's interest.

"Whether you actually do so or not is entirely your own affair, madam. Do not think I am impertinent, but you must make the offer."

"Why must I?"

Her chin went up a little. But she was more puzzled than annoyed; Nureddin could sell almost anything in the way of ideas.

"In the interests of justice. Without being vindictive, you surely wish to expose the man who struck your husband down, not giving him a chance."

Mrs. Barclay's eyes widened, and she leaned forward, and one hand closed tight on the gilded arm of the down-cushioned love seat. "How would such a purchase have that effect?"

"I do not know, not yet. But if the Pacific & Asiatic Import Company goes under an entirely new management, it would be better. Perhaps you were thinking of retaining your interest, as a silent partner, under a new agreement of partnership?"

"Well . . . " She eyed me, then said, "That had occurred to me. But—I wasn't too sure of Mr. Westfield. He has had family troubles, and he plays the races."

"Of course. You would not be too certain that your interest would be protected. So why not make him a fair offer? You could readily engage a manager to attend to the import business.

"You could sell out, yes. But a gambler is usually in need of money, and so you would get the advantage if you bought. He'd sell for a low figure."

"I think I see your point," she said, slowly.

NUREDDIN poured on the oil. "I rather suspected, from the chief clerk's remarks, that your husband was the real head of the partnership, and that Mr. Westfield's only asset beside his original investment was his Chinese connections. And with the suicide of Kwong Li—"

"Oh." She sat up straight. "When?"

"This afternoon. I know you've had no time for the papers. As I said, with Kwong Li's suicide, I doubt that Mr. Westfield's connections amount to much."

"You don't like Mr. Westfield?"

"I do not have more confidence in him than you do. Until he is entirely out of the company, my hands are tied. Justice is tied, and doubly blind.

"The police have a suspect, and so far, I am unable to prove that they are wrong. Help me, and I shall clear him—and expose the criminal."

"Westfield?" She fairly whispered that.

Nureddin's gesture committed him to nothing at all. "Westfield has some odd associates. Please call him, now. I am sure he will hurry over."

She went into the hall, where there was a phone alcove. I listened to the dial ticking.

I said to Nureddin, "Look here, if he did Kwong Li dirt, those Chinese will kill him, and it's pretty hard to hang anything on a dead man. Even if you are holding out circumstantial evidence, it won't do a bit of good unless the cops can use it to slug a confession out of him, and how do you slug a corpse?"

"The Chinese will not harm him. Neither can you make a corpse tell where ten cases of apricots are hidden."

I could hardly make out what Mrs. Barclay was saying over the wire.

WHEN she came back, she began, "He is quite interested. He will be over as soon as he can get in touch with his lawyer. He wants to draw up the papers."

"Without an inventory, or checking of the books?"

"The final price will depend on all that, and he said that he'd take a down payment, the balance to be subject to the auditor's report."

Nureddin leaned back, eyes nearly shut. He was twisting that big emerald set in old, soft gold. I've seen him on short rations, but I've never seen him hocking that chunk of green. Unless you knew emeralds, you'd never believe it was the real McCoy. Suddenly, he sat up.

"Mrs. Barclay."

"Yes?"

"All it takes is what you call a 'binder', to make this agreement of sale a sound transaction?"

"That is right." She hitched herself back in the love seat, smoothed her skirt down over those trim legs. "But I need not go that far; I can always call for more time to consider."

She still wasn't sold on Nureddin's idea, and I wondered if he could talk her into slapping five or ten grand on the line. She was no one's dummy. As long as emotion prodded her, she'd carry on, but soon she'd cool off.

Nureddin took the ring from his finger. He held it, looking at it himself, turning it a little, until it was a great ball of live green under the lights.

He said, "I noticed that this held your interest, Mrs. Barclay. Would you care to examine it?"

"Oh, I hadn't really—"

She meant she hadn't realized she had eyed it so openly that he'd noticed her. Before she knew it, the ring was in her hand. Her brows pulled together, just a little, and her mouth became O-shaped.

"Why, it's genuine. It's marvelous. I never saw, not even at Shreve's—"

"Few people can believe that it is genuine Mrs. Barclay. The Emperor of all India, Shah Jahan, gave it to one of my ancestors, nearly three hundred years ago. The appraiser at Shreve's tried to tempt me. But how did you recognize this stone?"

"I have a few very small ones, Mr. Ali."

Her fingers curled a little, she hated to return it. He did not reach for it. He let her caress that old gold, that smooth, deep green; it seemed to wink in the light.

"Try it on your middle finger, Mrs. Barclay. It takes a woman's smooth white skin to do it justice."

It was a loose fit. It did look swell.

Then he got up, and uncorked the play: "Give Westfield a check to bind the bargain. Give him five thousand, ten thousand, enough so that he will know you are not trifling.

"I will leave Shah Jahan's emerald with you as a hostage, Mrs. Barclay, in case my advice goes to your disadvantage. If in a week you say I was wrong, sell the emerald to whatever jeweler can give you its value."

She was on her feet now, first looking down at the ring, and then up at Nureddin. "This is to assure me that you are working for me, and not for Mr. Westfield?"

"Just that. Perhaps you had best call your lawyer to assist with the papers. But do not let him persuade you against a substantial payment."

He bowed, touched his fingertips to his forehead. "Now we must leave. Before Mr. Westfield calls."

FOR a second the widow stopped looking fascinated by the emerald; she was frightened. "Oh, but I can't run the risk. This stone is worth the whole import company! Suppose—"

"I do not worry, Mrs. Barclay. It has been stolen several times in the past few centuries, but no thief has ever been happy with it. Good evening, Mrs. Barclay."

He didn't give her a chance to go with us to the door. He left her standing there with Lord knows how many thousand dollars' worth of splendor on her finger.

I didn't know what to say.

When I started booting the bus up the grade, Nureddin took command. "Take this locomotive back to your lot, and get me something small, black, and common. Something that will keep a man from realizing that he is being followed."

There wasn't anything I could say after seeing him risk—and don't tell me there wasn't any risk—an emerald as big as a goose egg, just to get Anne Jordan's dad out of the district attorney's paws.

Already, I had a hunch we'd be hanging the sign of Mr. Seven on someone that night.

Not within the week, but that night, or at least, the one after.

Just where Mrs. Barclay's check for five thousand would come in, I couldn't guess; but it's a cinch Nureddin wasn't playing when he tossed Shah Jahan's emerald to a strange woman.

VI

ONCE Nureddin got a V-8 from my lot, he went back to watch Mrs. Barclay's house. He said there might be a lot of sleep lost, that there was no need of me watching with him, and that it was about time someone saw Anne. So I phoned her, and drove over.

Anne was pretty low. Before I got a chance to tell her what Nureddin was cooking up, she started off, "They're working on Dad, wearing him down, keeping him awake.

"No, I couldn't see him, but I know. They're trying to make him tell where he put the tanks of gas, and the torch. And that fool of a lawyer—"

She doubled over in the big needlepoint chair, and began crying into her hands. I knelt beside her and patted her shoulder. "What'd he do?"

"That's it." She choked a little. "Nothing, just nothing. Running around in circles. Oh, I know what he's working for, trying to find out if we have enough money for an appeal. That's obvious."

"Appeal? Wait till he's indicted."

"No, but he will be. That fool's been suggesting that Dad take a plea, claim self-defense, claim he was drunk, insanity by reason of drunkenness, or something like that."

"Huh. Even manslaughter, with a breaking and entering would amount to capital punishment. A couple years of San Quentin would kill him. That lawyer is afraid to risk a not guilty, and getting either an acquittal or else the works for his client. He isn't really selling you down the river."

"Oh, he isn't! Well, it amounts to just that!"

I hated to see her cutting up that way, but I didn't want to tell her about Nureddin's combination play. Mainly because I didn't see how all this finagling around was going to work. I had a deep hunch it would, or Nureddin would not toss the Emperor's emerald around casually.

But spilling that Chinese angle wouldn't help Anne, and it might hurt Nureddin. All I could say was, "Nureddin's cooking up something tonight, he's watching a suspect."

"Who?" She sat up straight.

"Westfield. Do you know, there was something odd about that cutting job. I don't know why I didn't think of it before.

"That door was cut from the inside. You can tell by the way the slag from hot metal, the oxides, you know, stick on the edge furthest from where the torch nose is held.

"Your dad didn't have a key, did he?"

"Of course he didn't, Dean. He turned everything in." But that didn't last long; her smile faded and her face dropped. "They'll say he had a duplicate made. And threw it away when he finished the job."

WHEN I left Anne, I began to wonder if Nureddin had noticed that the door had been cut from the inside. I kept wondering all the next day.

And when he did phone, that night, there was no chance to ask him. For once he was in a hurry.

"Meet me where Hunter's Point Avenue curves at the ship's graveyard, quick! I'll be in the V-8, right at the end of the bend."

He hung up. I stuffed a .38 into my pocket, and took off. I went out Third Street, and a-helling across China Basin Channel. The district is all warehouses, gasoline storage dumps, freight sheds, with the big aluminum tank of the Pacific Gas & Electric commanding the works.

After dark there is not a dime's worth of traffic, though every once in a while a fellow bopping out of a cross street can line you up for a complete overhaul.

Nothing hit me, and no cops noticed me. A switch engine just missed taking off a rear fender, but I won a few seconds for the risk. And I thanked Nureddin's Allah when I saw that the bridge at Islais Channel wasn't even thinking of lifting to let a barge go through.

Then I poured her around the curve at Evans Avenue, going so fast that the smell of rubber killed the slaughterhouse bouquet.

The bus was steaming like Old Faithful. Smoky Joe hadn't filled the radiator. I booted her till she pounded. The pistons seized. I was so sore I didn't think of cussing. Running took too much breath.

It wasn't a long sprint, past the power substation and the pile drivers, ferry boats, and barges rotting in the salt flats of India Basin. Squatters lived in some of

the derelicts, the long-abandoned boats.

Not that I saw all this as I ran. I knew that tumble-down corner, and wondered what family Nureddin had tangled with, who he had spotted.

He must have heard my hoofs, or my breathing. Before I could spot the make of the car parked at the far end of the curve, I saw a turban in the dark.

Nureddin said, "If you ran all the way from home, you did nicely."

"Which way?"

He pointed. "Around the corner. The old brewery."

THE square tower reached maybe thirty feet up from the side hill. It was a skeleton, and only the walls of the substructure were standing: what was left was solid masonry, built years ago.

I'd often seen it, while driving out to the sea food joints, a mile or so beyond. There were tunnels leading way into the middle of the hill, drifted into rock. Lagering vaults for beer at one time.

"Where do I come in?" I hefted the .38.

"Put it away. You're merely a witness."

"You had your guts, going to the nearest phone. Your men could've ducked out and gotten away."

"Not with what he was doing."

"He?" Funny, I hadn't asked him sooner. "Who?"

"Westfield."

So it wasn't the Chinaman after all. I followed Nureddin up the slope, and across the three-by-twelves that hadn't rotted. Ahead, it was black as a squaw's pocket. We were in an artificial cave. I was afraid even to whisper, so I couldn't ask him how about a flash light.

That would have been wasted breath. There was a light, far in. A column or angle or something blocked all but the indirect glow. I heard a funny sound, familiar, but hard to name. Also, a pouring and sloshing.

We were on concrete paving now. I walked like a cat on eggs, and it seemed I made more noise than a junk wagon. Nureddin might have been a ghost, or the devil.

Yeah, the devil, come to think of it; I never forgot the time he made a Hindu murderer hang himself.

That yell ahead of us convinced me that Satan had popped up. I didn't know a man could make a sound like that: choked, but shrill, tearing the guy's throat. I drew my gun and followed the turban, though running the other way would have been more fun.

We swung around a corner, and did I nearly drop when I saw what was in the half-masked light of a battery lantern!

Westfield was there, backed against the wall, his hands high and dripping, his good-fellow face all gray; his chin sagged to his chest.

There were four-five empty boxes, and about as many not emptied; fifty-sixty cans with the lids slashed open. That explained the funny sounds I'd heard at first.

The floor was stacked with green apricots, and flowing with syrup that drip-dripped into a drainage channel to our right. I could hear the dripping, because the only other sound was Westfield's breathing.

Then I felt like Westfield. There were Chinamen there, with knives and drawn guns. All but one stood back in the shadows, so not a face was plain.

The one coming toward Westfield when we barged in was Kwong Li.

Kwong Li, smiling that "me Klistian Chinaman" smile he used when cutting down a highbinder, had come out of his gaudy coffin.

I WAS so shocked I saw things I'd not have noticed otherwise, right away. There were pearls near the green apricots. Great big shining pearls on a piece of flannel.

Westfield had been cutting open the cans until he found the one that was loaded with more than fruit.

Nureddin stopped the parade. Westfield yelled, "Don't let 'em kill me!"

Kwong Li said, "You catchee aplicot?"

Nureddin answered, "No savvee aplicot, me catchee him fellow, chop-chop. Maskee no see, you belong dead."

Kwong Li scooped up the pearls. As near as I could get the pidgin English, Nureddin meant, "I want the guy, not the loot, and what's more, I didn't see you, you're dead."

Granting that Chinamen are lousy shots, and that I had a gun, it still was tactful. But I was worried; we knew too much, and how long before Kwong Li began to consider ways and means? Smuggled pearls would interest the customs officials.

I was still shaking when the yellow wave drew back, looped around, and slipped along the further wall, heading back to the road. And by then, Westfield could speak.

"Why'd you let those devils get away? They murdered my partner. I trailed one of them to the loot; the others surprised me."

A good yarn. First class. Nureddin took it with a smile, and said, "You opened the cans when you found them. Suspecting, of course, that such useless booty must contain smuggled valuables?"

"Certainly. But who are you? I've seen you before."

"Nureddin Ali, at Kwong Li's funeral. I have been watching you ever since Mrs. Hewitt Barclay gave you that check."

"What? What?" That shook him.

"Yes, that check, Westfield. The one I asked her to give you, so that you would have a reasonable excuse to leave town with the pearls you kept, instead of sharing them with Kwong Li.

"When Mrs. Barclay offered to buy your interest in the warehouse, you were very happy to sell. You wanted to leave San Francisco ever since that white rooster was put on your desk. That faked suicide by Kwong Li shook you."

Then I saw the cylinders of acetylene, way off in a dark corner. "There they are," I sounded off. "The gas, the torch."

"And," Nureddin said, pointing to Westfield, "here is the man who murdered Hewitt Barclay. The man who faked a robbery in a futile attempt to convince Kwong Li that the pearls had been stolen by an outsider, not by an accomplice.

"Barclay surprised you, Westfield, while you were robbing your own warehouse. So you hit him with a pinch bar."

"You're crazy! You can't prove it—the police can't—" He laughed. "You're whacky, you damn Turk."

Nureddin shrugged. "In your wardrobe is a pair of trousers, and a pair of shoes, all peppered with droplets of iron on them. Molten iron spattering from a torch cut. Drops so fine that they can burn through your socks and you scarcely feel them on your skin.

"Even if there is not one fingerprint on the torch, those clothes finish you, Mr. Westfield."

He tried to make a break, and I conked him with my gun barrel. Nureddin said, "That was needless. I have sabotaged his parked car, up the block. A call to the police would bring a squad to search his house long before he could get home.

"Oh, well, give me a hand and we'll carry him."

Before we packed him out, I stepped over for a look at the cutting equipment. Any man who wasn't a positive runt could handle the stuff.

Westfield had snitched a "WC" size acetylene tank, which weighs only a little over ninety pounds, and a "K" size oxygen cylinder, which is the midget of its family.

I said to Nureddin, "He wouldn't need a helper to take this stuff out of his car, and into the warehouse, and then back again, to bring it out here and ditch it."

NUREDDIN eyed Westfield, listened to his breathing, and smiled in that gentle-assassin way of his. "This man will not know his own name for the next several days, I fear. But please continue explanations."

"Nothing left to say, I said it all."

"Pardon me, but not all and not totally accurate. He did not have to remove tanks from his powerful and costly car. He had merely to pass the torch and hose through a ventilator near the eaves, then go into the warehouse and start cutting. Now be pleased to assist with this—"

"The word is cold meat."

When we dumped Westfield into his own car, Nureddin opened the luggage compartment, which had an automatic light inside.

He pointed and said, "See the black paint that flaked off the acetylene cylinder? See the scraping of green enamel from the oxygen cylinder? Also, bits of red earth from the construction job where he stole these things.

"Now be pleased to drive to the nearest telephone; I will wait with the prisoner."

That settled it, and the rap stuck. Westfield squawked about the pearls, but Kwong Li didn't have them, and didn't know who did—that was his story.

He claimed he had been helping fellow tong brothers, and he didn't have the foggiest idea of what the score was—and he got away with that.

Nureddin figured that it wasn't his business helping the customs officials; all he was concerned about was to get his emerald back from Mrs. Barclay, and get Anne's dad out of the jug. He did both.

"You see," he told me, later, "it was simple. First, that torch cut was from the inside of the warehouse, so that the glare would not attract a possible passer-by, or switch engine crew. But for the murder that followed, that detail would not have been important.

"Then there was the way the Chinese let Westfield get to the coffin, but kept us away. Westfield, already worried by the so-called suicide of the man he'd gypped, wouldn't notice that the supposed corpse was not totally dead.

"All these, and gossip from a couple of Chinese Moslems gave me my suspicions."

There was a sly smile, and he went on, "Finally, the funeral, before the corpse was cold, an old time Chinese is not buried until the *feng shui* men, the soothsayers, pick a lucky day.

"Westfield knew Chinese customs, but he did not think clearly, being worried by his conscience. Worried about the unintended killing of Barclay, and by the threat implied by Kwong Li's suicide-for-vengeance.

"Very simple for an Oriental, like myself."

It was just as simple as the way I sold Anne a reconditioned guaranteed, a couple days after. She never drives it, because she's got too many boy friends with cars.

There may be justice in the world, but where do I come in?

Cass Gentry tossed the snakeskin hatband on the bar. "Explain this," he growled

Gunswift

By Jack Byrne

CASS GENTRY, coming to Triangle Town with his partner SWIFTY OGDEN, finds that his job is to untangle a sinister web of mystery. A professional gun-hand, Gentry quickly decides that the best technique is to start rattling Triangle's skeletons. Only thus will he be able to probe the murder of

MATT MCHALE, the owner of the Rocker-M ranch, who was shot down and robbed a year before. Since his death the Rocker-M herd has been severely raided by rustlers, and nesters have over-run the range, taking advantage of the new homestead law. The inheritance of

MARY ELLEN MCHALE, the dead rancher's daughter, has dwindled almost to nothing. Deserted by her fiancé, the smooth young lawyer MARTIN BURDETTE, Mary has found refuge in the home of one of her few remaining friends, DR. GEORGE FARABAUGH; she is a companion for the doctor's wife, ADA, a crippled and embittered woman. Also loyal to Mary is BEARPAW, a grizzled veteran of the Rocker-M.

OLLIE SHAND, cattle-thief, is the man most generally suspected of Matt McHale's murder, for McHale and his men strung up Shand's father. Yet it is Shand who saves the lives of Gentry and Ogden when they ride into an ambush by Kettledrum River. Shand kills the ambusher,

TEX CORDILL, formerly the ramrod on the Rocker-M, now a tool of the mysterious Triangle combine. Only a few minutes after the killing Gentry and the others see a man approach the body of Cordill and take from it a thick sheaf of bills. Then he rides away, but Shand has recognized him to be

VIC BARTH, deputy sheriff in Triangle. Barth's crony is WASH PARSONS, the mayor, and Gentry has no particular suspicion of that oeery man until he witnesses a secret meeting between Parsons and a buck-toothed stranger out on the range. Suspicion grows when Cass discovers that Buck-tooth, the wearer of a snakeskin hatband, played some part in a rustler raid.

FRANK IRISH, Triangle's shrewd banker, cannot explain to Cass why Matt McHale left behind him so meager an estate. He had considered McHale a wealthy man. Irish warns Gentry to take it slow and easy in his probing of Triangle's mystery, but Cass believes in the use of dynamite. So he roughly handles

BEN QUIGG, the rabbity sheriff, demanding to know what happened to the bills taken by VIC BARTH from Cordill's body. Could that be the same money that was stolen from the murdered McHale a year before? Continuing to push the fight, Gentry knocks around several cowhands from the Snaketrack ranch, owned by

ABEL BANNISTER, an old enemy of Matt McHale. It is suspected that Bannister may have a hand in the rustling of the Rocker-M herd, and now Cass serves notice on him that he will have some explaining to do.

HOP RANDOLPH, gambler, was once the suitor for Mary Ellen McHale's hand, and he had cause to hate old Matt McHale. But Cass somehow trusts this bitter, heavy-drinking man; he believes him when the gambler says he had nothing to do with the murder. Randolph has a savage distrust for Martin Burdette, but he will not explain why, and Cass Gentry has been unable to shake the glib poise of the young lawyer.

Triangle contains two secondary mysteries which are puzzling. What is the Englishman, TALBOT, doing in town? And who supplies DUKE COSTELLO with money and why is the man drinking himself to death? . . .

One night, while Cass Gentry is stabling a horse in the Farabaugh barn, Mary Ellen McHale comes to him there; and she tells him that to have him as an ally has given her new strength. They are talking when a gun explodes in the night outside, and only Cass' split-second lunge saves the girl from the bullet intended for her. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

LIGHT IS DANGER

CASS GENTRY shot out the lantern. He was twisting toward the girl to shield her as he fell, he was kicking the hampering bench aside, he was hooking his weapon out of the leather and pointing it by blind reckoning and fingering the trigger—all these swift functions packed into that heartbeat interval between the instant that Mary Ellen was driven back and the instant following when Cass Gentry sprawled on the stable flooring.

The echoes of the gunblast that had buzzed a bullet between them were still pounding the stable walls when Cass fired his answer. He shot at their greatest danger, the light that would expose them to a following attack, and his heavy slug shattered the glass, knocked metal clanking, brought down the curtain of darkness.

He fired, and he rolled his body wildly in the gloom. His free hand sought for Mary Ellen to warn her somehow against any movement, any faintest noise. His fingers touched her face, and two hands tightened on his wrist and pulled his palm against her cheek.

This story began in the Argosy for February 15

She had sensed his message. In those tense seconds of waiting, he could feel the warmth of her breath and the silken softness of her parted lips. His muscle-ridged arm marked the slow lift of her breast in tempo with his own soft inhalations. He was propped on elbow and hip, and the muzzle of his Colt's was posed to cover any stir from the blacker blot of the doorway.

For more than a minute the frozen tableau held. A shake of his wrist signaled Mary Ellen to loose her grip then, and Cass lifted in a crouch. He crossed to the doorway swiftly, huddled at the opening to peer into the bare expanse of yard.

The kitchen light still burned in the house, and in the shadowed space between he could see or hear nothing. As he watched, however, a second light flared in an upper room. A muffled voice called out, then lifted in sharper alarm.

The girl had crept after him. "It's Mrs. Farabaugh," she whispered. "I've got to go to her—"

"Stick close beside me," Cass said. "Scared off, I guess, whoever it was." The .45 jutted from his hand, moving with the slow turn of his head that searched the night. Mary Ellen's shoulder rubbed his arm as they crossed to the kitchen entrance.

"Lock that door when you get inside," Cass said grimly. "I'll look around the back here."

She nodded. Mrs. Farabaugh was shrilling her name, and she called out reassurance. Cass gave the gun a savage jerk as he turned. That singing bullet had whizzed as close to her head as to his own. He thought of the roan horse, foundered on the creek bank, and the image of what might have happened on that stable bench twitched his mouth with rage.

Who were they? What murderer had been prowling there? At which of them had the skulking gun been aimed—at Cass Gentry or Mary Ellen?

He had scarcely begun to search the shadows when sounds from the street interrupted. Dr. Farabaugh came hurrying along the driveway, a long-striding giant, with Bearpaw humping behind him.

"Did those shots come from this way?" Gentry?" he hailed. "What's up, man? Why are all my lights burning?"

"Some kind friend took a shot at me," Cass said, "with no harm done. I was just about to strike a light and see if any trace might been left behind. I'm afraid the ground's too wet, though."

"I told yuh!" Bearpaw exclaimed. "When them shots cracked off I said to the doc they sounded from his direction. Where's Ellie?"

Cass told the story briefly while lanterns were being lighted in the stable. Old Bearpaw rumbled a string of expletives, and Farabaugh's hand, huge and hairy, made a convulsive snatching motion.

"It was something like this I was afraid of," he said, thin-voiced. "I—we—it can't go on." He turned to stare toward the lights of the house. "Perhaps I'd better see if there's something to be done for Mrs. Farabaugh."

THE soggy turf had no evidence the amber lights could find. The stable verged on a narrow alley that was irregularly lined with sheds and fences, and the would-be killer might have approached from any direction or have vanished into countless dark hidings. There had been ample time for getaway, Cass thought, in that interval when the threat of further attack had forced him to play possum.

"Might've been anybody," he said dully. "I saw no more than a ghost in the dark. Heavy-caliber pistol, I'd judge from the sound—which is just about all we got to go on. There's nothin' more we can do here. Mudded tracks wouldn't tell us much, nohow. Whereabouts were you when you heard the shots?"

"Over town—corner of Division Street. I seen the doc turn out of there, an' him an' me was passin' the time—"

"What I meant was," Cass said, "that if we knew certain people stood elsewhere at the time, at least we'd know who *didn't* do it. How long you been over town?"

"I stayed close here," Bearpaw protested, "until she blew her light out. She tried to run me off—"

"It wasn't your fault," Cass said. "I drew the fire on her, more'n anybody." He thumbed his chin. "Has Vic Barth showed up lately?"

"Not that I know. I ain't seen 'im. Me'n Swifty been hangin' out like yuh told us, watchin' who talked with who an' what little things went on. Wampum Street's still waxin' strong. The biggest crowd's at Venable's, an' Swifty's watchin' that high-stake Sattid'y game they hold there."

"Who could you account for when the shots cracked off, and maybe a little before?"

"WELL"—Bearpaw pushed back his soggy hat—"I sat on the step of the Travelers' House, just before that time, to roll me a smoke. Le's see now. . . . Ben Quigg was snorin' drunk in his cubbyhole, an' that big Dutchman of his was runnin' Duke Costello out of the Happy Hour so as to head off a fight. The Duke gen'ally delivers speeches around this hour of mornin' an' gits overloud. The party at Eli Lombard's had split up, an' five or six come down the hill for a nightcap."

"Was Burdette along?"

"He was, damn 'im," Bearpaw said. "Him an' Frank Irish an' Henry Gaunt an' some others. They passed me close. Mr. Fancy-pants Burdette said he'd step across to his office to pick up some papers an' join 'em at the Wheel of Fortune later. He—"

"What's the matter?" Cass said.

"Funny," said Bearpaw. "It never struck me before. From where I was on the street I'd shorely notice his office light up. He crossed to'rds the buildin', puddle-jumpin', but I can't recall any lamp that lit upstairs there."

Martin Burdette night-prowling? That slick young lawyer risking his handsome skin to further some sly scheme he had? The odds were against it, yes, but it still remained a possibility.

"Who else was around?" Cass asked.

"The Snaketrack bunch are mainly at the Happy Hour, cuttin' high-jinks. That hook-nosed feller yuh run in with is one of Bannister's high-priced gunhands, they say. He didn't take to the way yuh handled 'im, I reckon. He was talkin' mighty big a little earlier, curlin' quite a kink into his tail."

Cass nodded. There was no telling who might have seen him ride into town with the doctor. Plenty enough time had elapsed, while he was putting up the buggy and tending the doctor's horse, for word of his return to be passed along. Two minutes' walk, cutting the back lots, would fetch a man from Wampum Street to the stable.

"There wasn't much doin' on the street," Bearpaw said. "The rain kept 'em close in the shank of the evenin', an' I know from the days when I was frisky that a drinkin' man or a gamblin' man, er whatever else, don't change his stand much after midnight.

"I did see Hop Randolph come out fer a breather walk, an' Venable went lookin' from place to place to see what trade the rest was doin', an' Wash Parsons waddled off somewheres—"

"What time was that?" Cass said sharply.

"Why, I dunno. Jest latterly. It was five-ten minnits before I run into the doc."

Cass lifted his shoulders, let them sag. "It's like I first said—it might been anybody. It could been some stranger we never heard tell of. You might stop at the house and see if she's—if they're all right in there. Mis Farabaugh took a real big scare, from the way she sounded."

"She's sickly," Bearpaw said. "Been crippled up fer years. I shorely pity her if she has to stand these doggone miseries I git in my bones when it turns this kind of rainy weather."

"See you," Cass said. "I'll go and hunt up Swifty."

HE TRAVELED the alley. The lights of Wampum Street had a brighter shine in the clearing air, and he stood briefly to look and listen.

At this dim hour the thoroughfare again wore the haggard guise he remembered from his pre-dawn stroll. The black hulks of houses straggled forlornly, though now they were spotched with lighted squares and oblongs. Six saloons still running open in this one block, Cass counted, and more beyond.

He walked toward the biggest light, the noisiest light, toward the Wheel of Fortune, and a secretive whistle hailed him midway along. He halted, turning, and the Young 'Un stepped out from the shadow of a wall.

"You'd already passed," he said, "before I could make you out. I thought you was out of town, Mr. Gentry."

"You're slippin'," Cass said. "I come back a little spell ago, as others seemed to notice. What you cattin' around for, this hour of night? Young stuff your age should be long in bed."

"I had to let somebody know," said the boy. "I couldn't find Bearpaw, and I'd give myself away if I tried to catch Swifty's eye in Venable's. I went out to the shack—"

"What's up?" Cass muttered.

"Vic Barth's back," the Young 'Un breathed. "I figgered you'd want to know. I ain't see 'im—he ain't showed his face around—but his white-footed horse is in the Spur Corrals, and his saddle too. Been there more'n a hour."

CHAPTER XVII

WHEEL OF FORTUNE

CASS moved slowly along the bar in the Wheel of Fortune. The big room was heavy with warmth, with stale scents, with a smoky haze that eddied against the rafters. It buzzed with a drone of talk, a murmur of small related sounds.

The long bar was well lined. Cass counted eight tables of poker, big and small, in session. Against the north wall a wheel of roulette was spinning, and a birdcage layout had ten or twelve gathered around. There were a pair of faro boards where twenty or more bucked the tiger.

Cass Gentry's entrance caused no stir, no special notice that he could discover. At this hour of night the drinkers were too deep in their drinks and their talk, the gamblers too absorbed in their games, to be easily distracted. Cass was passing toward the rear, toward the table where

the thickest ring of watchers were gathered.

He saw familiar faces. Hop Randolph was dealing from a faro box, and Martin Burdette was one of a group at a bar-side table. Some quality in Cass Gentry's stare must have transmitted its message, for the young lawyer turned his head as Cass was moving past. In that quick clash of glances, Cass thought he could detect a flicker of emotion.

Cass hesitated deliberately. His gaze traveled down to Burdette's tight-fitting trouser leg, to the mudded boot. It was possible that a man might splash himself so in crossing the puddled street. Such spatter-marks might also be acquired in running the alley shadows.

Shrugging, Cass strode on. Two-thirds of the boots and brogans in Triangle Town would be muck-browned to some extent, and the scrapings of them all would not assay a single ounce of proof.

Swifty Ogden saw him coming. He edged through the ring of spectators at the big table, and the tilt of his head steered Cass aside. Sudden shifts of plan and tactics were the usual course in any deal where Cass Gentry was concerned, and Swifty accepted his presence without question. They found elbow-room along the rear wall.

"There's a man in the game," Swifty said, "who was huntin' the town for you around supper time. Abe Bannister, they call 'im, and he looks like he might be hard to throw."

"That's fine," said Cass. "I'll spare 'im further lookin'. What else goes on?"

"There was quite a stir a while ago. Some gent busted in to holler that night riders was loose up north. Bannister's leadin' a bunch to look into it, come daylight. There's been talk of necktie parties and the whole county gangin' up to wipe out Ollie Shand."

"Yeah," said Cass, "it's a loud-talkin' town. Looks like they got a good-sized game there."

"Real good," Swifty muttered. He touched the fading bruise that ringed his eye, wagging his head. "If I could put my hands on a stake of money. . . ." He sighed. "But I reckon it's just as well. They've stepped the bets beyond a bankroll of my caliber since that little banker-man of yours sat in."

"You mean Frank Irish?"

"He took a chair about a hour back. They say he plays here once a week, and I'd tell a man he knows his poker. He bets 'em both ways—when he's got 'em and when he hopes to git 'em. That brick-faced Englishman's dropped one pile a'ready and had to ramble out to collect fresh money."

"Let's have a look," Cass said, and they circled the cordon of onlookers to find a vantage that would put their backs against the wall.

STUD-HORSE poker was the game, and seven players sat at the big round table. Dan Venable, a lean and angular man of middle years, banked this high-stakes table each Saturday night.

A thousand dollar stack was the minimum requirement, and the final hand was customarily dealt at the crack of dawn. It was a gentleman's game—traveling deal, no cut to the house, no side bets permitted. The biggest men in the nearby country were frequent participants.

Tonight was representative. The scar-faced man, Swifty whispered, was one of the get-rich-quick crowd from Plateau. There was a mining man from Deadwood, a cigar-chewing redhead who owned a rival establishment down the street, and a stocky, brown-skinned man in a bowler hat who sat dourly between Venable and Frank Irish, showing no interest.

"Where's the Englishman?" Cass murmured.

"He ain't come back. That's his Man Friday holdin' down his chair. Take notice of that froze-face jigger, Cass. I overheard 'im talkin' earlier, and you can't hardly savvy a word he says. His mouth's full of prickle-burrs.

"I pieced out enough, though, to hit on one point that struck me funny. Ain't this Englishman supposed to be a minin' man? If that's the case, why is his meal-mouthed right bower so doggone nosey—"

Cass jogged his arm. He was shifting for a view of the seventh man, and over an intervening shoulder he had his first sight of the Snaketrack boss, Abel Bannister.

Swifty had called the man right, Cass thought. Bannister had the look of a critter who would be hard to rope and tough to throw. A bull-muscled neck was set on a body that was thickly layered with strength. His coppery face was broad, harshly lined, blunt featured. His pouched eyes, wrinkled now against the reflected shine of the swing-lamp above the table, inspected his layout of cards with suspicion. He glared at the man who had bet five yellow chips on his ace-king in sight.

"Call yuh," he growled. "I swallowed down enough damn' bluffs for one night."

"And up another five hundred," said Frank Irish briskly. "I've got to protect this little straight I aim to fill."

"That's what I mean," Swifty muttered. "A ten-spot's his highest up-card, yet he bets 'em as if he had the table beat. He's lucky, too. Wait and see if the final fall don't pair 'im."

And so it happened. The fifth card gave the banker sevens over tens to beat Bannister's back-to-back queens.

"I got second sight," Frank Irish crowed. "I could see that seven comin'."

"Deal the cards!" the rancher growled. "It ain't your winnin', Frank, that I mind so much as it is the fact that you always got to be so right about ever' little thing that happens."

"LET me through here!" a high voice commanded, and Cass saw the pink face of Talbot as the tall Englishman pushed through the watchers. His pale eyes were angry beneath yellow brows, and he spoke with jerky impatience.

"Sorry, gentlemen, sorry. Never like to delay the proceedings. Very good, Lowery. Take this coat, will you, and have them send a fresh glass."

He settled in the chair that his dour companion vacated, produced a sheaf of squarish currency from his fuzzy jacket. "Pounds sterling," he announced. "No objection, I trust. I am playing five thousand of your dollars."

"Fresh money!" said the man from Deadwood. "Shake up that deck and let me at it!"

"Wasted a confounded hour," the Englishman muttered. "Stupid fellow at the inn wasn't on hand to open his strongbox. Had to chase all about in your beastly muck. . . . Eh? What's that? Oh, yes, yes, certainly."

He cut the deck that the dealer had pushed toward him.

Cass stared at the long-faced Britisher. Talbot's present attire, from white stock to glossy puttees, showed no evidence of muddy wanderings. Was it over-sharp imagination which made Cass think that the Englishman's public announcement had been too elaborate?

The cards had been flipped around the board. When the first betting came to Frank Irish he folded his hand. "I pass the buck," he said. "I've no mind to quit winner, gentlemen, but you'd better deal around me for the next few hands. There's a man I got to see. Can you spare a minute, Abe?"

"Me?" said the rancher. "Hell, no! I'll hike your bet there five blues, mister. What man—what for?"

Frank Irish was showing his wise grin. "Why, the man you been lookin' for," he said. "I thought if you had the time, Abe, I'd make you acquainted with Cass Gentry who's standin' back in the crowd there."

CHAPTER XVIII

WHISPER THE DAWN

A FLUTTER ran through the ringed watchers—bodies shifting, heads turning, feet shuffling. Men shrank away as Abel Bannister's chair grated the flooring and as Cass stepped a half-pace backward to merge with his shadow against the wall.

It was a queerly strained situation, a small drama suddenly set in motion by the little banker's ironic stagecraft. Anything might have stemmed from it, Cass thought, though the actual eventuality was the development he least expected.

The Snaketrack boss came to his feet. He leaned forward, his head thrust aggressively, and confronted Cass with a black-browed glare.

"Your name Gentry?" he demanded.

"So I been told," said Cass.

"I been lookin' for you, Gentry," the bull-necked man said with heavy emphasis, "to make some statements plain. The first is that any Snaketrack hand, from the boss on down, who hooraws a woman on the public street—he deserves what's comin'! If I'd been in your boots this evenin', mister, I'd dosed them hammerheads of mine with the selfsame medicine you dealt out, or more so."

He slapped the table. "That's that, Gentry. The second thing is Tex Cordill. I hired 'im for the simple reasons that he savvies cattle and knows this country and needed a job.

"If he mixed into crookedness at the Rocker, which you've hinted around, it was none of my affair. If he taken a pot-shot at you, as you claim, it wasn't done by Snaketrack orders. Is that plumb clear?"

"I never stated otherwise," Cass said quickly.

"But while we're at it," Bannister rushed on, "let's git the whole fandango straight. Where is Cordill, and what exactly happened with you and him at the Kettledrum?"

"I left it to the sheriff to look into that," Cass said. "You mean to tell me—"

"I mean it's time to back your talk with some facts," Bannister said gruffly. "You word's no better'n the next man's here in Triangle, Gentry. Bluff and blow cuts no ice with me.

"The bunch that looked over the Six Pole ford did find some signs of skirmish. There was spent shells, a spot of blood, and Cordill ain't been seen since he headed out yonderly. Since it's one of my hands accused I'll trouble you for the plain story, mister."

So that had been Vic Barth's sly dodge? Doubling back, hiding Cordill's body—it was a cleverness Cass should have foreseen. By that one little stunt the deputy had reduced the bushwhacking incident to a question of Cass Gentry's evidence against his own.

Cass instantly saw the dangers of the situation. "We was shot at from the bank," he said. "Costello's boy can prove that Cordill chased after us. His picture tallies with what we saw of the man be-

hind the bushwhack gun. We shot 'im down—"

"You killed 'im?" Bannister demanded.

"We left 'im for dead," Cass said. "Looks like we might been mistaken, though, since he up and gone."

Bannister eyed him suspiciously. "Smells damn queer to me," he said. "What's this talk of Vic Barth bein' in on it, robbin' money from Tex? Vic says he's never set eyes on you, and he ain't seen Cordill for days."

"I reckon that's for Barth and me to argue," Cass said grimly. "I'll attend that little matter right away."

BANNISTER grunted. "There's one more thing, Gentry," he said. "If you got some notion of lockin' horns with me there's no call to weasel-foot. This afternoon you spoke a question to my boys that a bunch of other damn' fools been mumblin'. I'll answer it here and now.

"There ain't no Skunktrack mystery in the way I've held my losses down. It's been done by spendin' money, by hirin' extra hands and ridin' double shifts. I ain't been licked, Gentry, and I won't be licked, so long as I still got stren'th to fight. We got plans laid—"

"Easy Abe!" Frank Irish called out. "I suggest we finish this in Venable's office."

"I'll hold my tongue," the burly rancher growled. "It's a sign what Triangle's come to when a honest man can't speak his mind unless behind locked doors. It's a fine fix when the law lies drunk and thieves rob us blind. To hell with Triangle, I say. When we've cleaned out the Devil's Pocket we'll ride back here and finish the job!"

Frank Irish had sidled around the table to grip his arm. Men had come clustering from the reaches of the silenced room to listen. Perhaps Abel Bannister realized that his anger had led him to crow too loud, for he permitted the little banker to push him aside.

"Come along here, Gentry," Irish directed. "Let's use what heads we got on our shoulders. Yonder's the office."

In the narrow rear room they faced each other, briefly silent. Abel Bannister stood near the desk, fists on hips. Cass lounged in the angle near the window. White-tufted Frank Irish peered at them with his monkey's half-grin.

"I seem to be the middle-man," he said. "Let's see what profit I can shave out of bringin' you two together. You asked some questions concernin' Abe today, Gentry. Now's your chance to git the straight of 'em."

"I know what talk's been passed around," Bannister said. "Plenty fingers pointed to'rds me when Matt McHale was rubbed out, and it's a fact I had no cause to love 'im like a brother. His Rocker was as good a layout as mine—some ways better, mebbe—and any cattleman would like to own it.

"I never had no idea, though, that my legs spread wide enough to straddle both propositions. If I did have, it was knocked plumb out of me by them storms last fall. It may be that the Snaketrack wasn't hit as hard as some, but we was hurt a-plenty."

"I've seen the books Abe keeps," Frank Irish said, "and that's the gospel."

"I never did have cash enough to swing both irons," said Bannister. "I'm spread out too thin right now, and unless the market stays high my next shipments won't hardly cover the money I've had to borrow. There's no profit in ranchin' this country the way things stand, and there never will be until we clean that nest of thieves from the Pocket."

"You got any private notion who might've murdered McHale?" Cass asked.

"Private!" Bannister snorted. "Hell, man, any fool knows it was Ollie Shand! That yaller-headed ferret had his trap long baited for Matt, and nobody will tell me different. That boy's more pure poison than old Milo ever was.

"He's got twenty men hid out in that badlands maze, and it's a salty crew. For the last year, Gentry, them devils have been gettin' rich while honest men eke out on their leavin's."

"ABE'S got good reason to feel like he does about Devil's Pocket," Irish said. "His youngest boy was in town that day before Christmas when Matt McHale collected his Vigilantes. Rex was feelin' his drinks, I guess, and rode along with the bunch. He was one of the three that was shot in passin' through the Notch. He died later."

Bannister's face hardened. "It was the kid's bad luck," he said harshly. "I did hold it hard against McHale for a while—lettin' a boy of eighteen trail into a mess like that—but I got over it.

"I'll admit I never wept too hard when Matt was paid off. I didn't lift a finger, either, when the Rocker's tail was bein' twisted later. I've come to see, though, that we made a mistake. What happened to Matt's girl was a sign of what would come down on the rest of us if we didn't keep our horns sharp."

"Abe's got his organization pretty well along," said the little banker. "He's hired on a bunch of fightin' hands, and every day sees more of the smaller ranchers decide to throw in with him. He'll be all fixed, shortly, to smoke out Ollie Shand and straighten out the problems of the county."

"I hear you, Mr. Foxy," Bannister growled. "There may be a few snakes in town here we'll need to tromp on later, and we'll have to elect some honest law, but that Devil's Pocket is the first sore to be fired. And there'll never be a better time."

The queer sidelights of this Blue Hills mystery were shuffling again in Cass Gentry's mind. He could not doubt Abel Bannister's sincerity, and yet he remembered a similar sincerity in the voice of the stubble-chinned man who had hauled him from death in the Kettledrum roils. He moved his fingers to brush the lump in his pocket—the fold of a rattlesnake hatband—and his eyes were gravely thoughtful, gravely puzzled.

"Well, there you are, Gentry," Bannister said. "I've spread my soogans out. That's how I stand and what I aim to do. If your job is to hit back at the crowd that killed McHale and turned the Rocker belly-up, you're welcome to join us. Or play it lone, mister, just as you choose."

"What's your next move?" Cass asked.

"I'm takin' a few boys out to'rds the Valleys. They had some flurry at the LIG, and we'll look the ground over as soon as it comes light. I don't expect to find a thing, but it offers a chance to line up a few of the little stockmen that been jigglin' on the fence. I likewise intend to nose among that ragtag and bobtail bunch around Burnt Mills. Some think the Pocket outfit may have lookouts planted in there."

"I just come back from out that way," Cass said, "But I left without any real chance to get acquainted. If it's just the same, I might travel back along.

"Suit yourself," said Abel Bannister. "We'll ride from here about an hour, say, before sun-up."

THEY rode out in velvet darkness that would gradually pale with blue and sooty gray into a clear, fresh-smelling dawn. There were six horsemen. Cass Gentry rode in the van of them, beside Abel Bannister's stirrup.

With dry clothes on his back, with a catnap to rest him and a good meal under his belt, Cass was ready to greet what the morning offered. He had accepted the rancher's invitation on a spur-of-the-moment hunch, and the hunch seemed to have more wisdom behind it the more he he thought it over.

He wanted to see the Rocker country. He wanted a better chance to hear the opinions of these local men. Chiefly, however, he was pleased with the idea of getting out of Triangle Town before he overplayed his hand.

He had needed the meeting with Bannister to jolt him out of the proddy mood in which he entered the Wheel of Fortune. The shock of that bullet which had missed Mary Ellen's head so close—not to mention his own—had steamed him up pretty high.

He had been ready to suspect anybody and everybody. He had read guilt into Burdette's passing glance, into the Britisher's casual remarks, into the mud that splashed every bootheel. It would have been the same, or more so, if fat Wash Parsons or Deputy Vic Barth had shown their ugly hides.

And his instinct knew that the hour was not ripe. The time for fist and bullet was yet to come. He could not risk any harebrained risks, for *she* was depending on him.

Six horsemen riding north from Triangle Town. . . .

The lights they left behind were scant and weary. The Wheel of Fortune was the sole remaining sentinel along Wampum Street, and even there the night's carouse was staggering to its end. The wheels were hooded and swampers were piling the chairs. No more than a handful of diehards still watched the big-stakes poker game.

"Deadwood man's the heavy loser," a bartender muttered to a yawning stickman. "'Is R'yle Henglish 'Ighness hit a streak that pushed 'im ten thousand to the good."

"Them that has is them that gets," the stickman grumbled. . . .

At Farabaugh's house a lone lamp burned behind the window of the doctor's office. The bearded physician sat at his desk, elbows planted wide, staring blankly. Slowly his eyes lifted to the ceiling, and a muscular spasm humped his shoulders. His lips firmed, and abruptly he resumed his former task.

From the pigeonholes of the desk he removed tattered sheafs of papers—letters, accounts, bills, cuttings from medical journals. Some he rearranged and replaced. Others were dumped in a waste-basket.

He used a key to open a small inner compartment, producing a packet that rubber bands pressed thin. The topmost article was a worn bankbook in which was recorded the account of George F. Smith with the Federation Bank of Omaha.

Dr. Farabaugh fluttered the pages that listed substantial and regular deposits over a period of years, and his dark head made a jerky nod of decision as he fitted the bankbook packet into his pocket. . . .

AND there were lights across town, on Division Street. A low-turned wick sputtered in the upstairs room of Mrs. Rambo's gray house where the sick girl slept. A moving light descended the staircase there and halted at the curtained doorway of the bay-window parlor.

Madame Mustache was dressed in a silken black robe, and curl-papers twigged the pile of her hair. She held

her lamp at shoulder height to illumine the hunched shape on the floor. The crash of a bricabrac stand had hurried her below.

"What are you doing? What do you want? Get back in your chair and sleep it off, you fool!"

Costello, the drunken Duke, crawling the rug on hands and knees, turned on his hip and propped himself with a shivering arm. He looked up emptily.

"Drink," he said. "Li'l dram—good f'r beast an' good f'r man. Po'try." He chuckled, and his voice gained momentary distinctness: "Empyrean font," he said. "The rich, the blushful Hippocrene. . . . I beg your pardon, Lady of Shadows. Most grateful for your hosh—your hospitality."

"It was on the kid's account," the woman said, "that I sheltered you from the rain. For all I care, you could sleep in the gutter-muck you root in, or six feet under it. You can't stand on your feet, Costello. There's no place open now to serve you whisky, even if you had money to pay. Get back in your chair."

"I'll get money," he said. "My frien'—he'll buy a drink. My good frien'."

"Who's your friend, Costello?" she said sharply. "Who gives you the steady handouts? Who keeps you drunk?"

He was a shabby mud-caked scarecrow, lying there. He was sickly thin, and the skin of his unshaven face was skeleton-stretched across the bones. Hair ringed down over his forehead, and his sunken grin gave him an idiot's look. There was a knowing glint, however, in the bloodshot eyes that rolled up at her.

"Oh, no," he said slyly. "My client—profesh'nal confidence—lawyer never tells. Thass what I'm paid for—secret. Life 'n death. Means big money—thousan's—if I work it right."

"Wait," she said softly. "I've got a bottle. I'll brink a drink."

"Drink," he muttered. "You're my frien', too—my boy's frien'. Thass why I'm doin' this—a stake f'r my boy. Five thousan' I want f'r the Young 'Un. Let 'em kill me then an' I won't care. They'd killed me long ago if they didn't b'lieve"—he chuckled— "that I wrote down what I still don' know."

He sat up, pawing a hand across his face. "Big money f'r what they think I know," he said, "and all I really know—"

He peered at her owlishly. "Drink—a li'l dram—"

AND there was one more light, briefly flaring, that Cass Gentry left behind in Triangle Town. It was the flame of a match in the hand of Vic Barth. He touched it to his cigarette, and the glow painted his features harshly in brights and shadows. Then darkness again. Vic Barth moved on toward the Spur Corrals.

"Go home, damn you," he said to the bulky blot that trailed at his shoulder. "Crawl into the hay and whine to yourself. Pull the covers to hide your head."

"But listen, Vic!" Wash Parsons wheezed. "I on'y want to know where we stand. I got a right—"

The deputy bumped him. Vic Barth's hand clamped on the fat of his companion's shoulder, and his quick thrust staggered the heavier man. Barth's voice was thick with anger.

"You got a right to git that blubbermouth shut with a bullet," he rasped. "What damn good are you, anyhow? If it hadn't been for you goin' off half-cocked with Tex Cordill—"

"But I'm in it as deep as anybody, Vic. I ought to know what's goin' on. What's to be done about Gentry. How will we—"

"We'll do what we're told," said Barth. "It's all been figgered out. We'll handle Gentry when we're ready. There's a little scheme to settle 'im when he rides back to town."

"Yeah, but about the other things. I got to have money, I tell you. Did you tell 'im what I said? It'll take another thousand—"

"Now just exactly what," said Vic Barth slowly, "have you got itchin' up your sleeve? What's been bitin' you lately that you need money so bad? There wouldn't be another little somethin', would there, that you was hidin' out on the boss and me?"

"No, no, Vic. It's that bunch at the Mills, just like I said. They claim that extra work should bring in extra wages. I had a wrangle with Childress today, and I just can't keep stallin' 'im."

"I'll look into it," said the deputy. "I may be ridin' out that way. The thing is, Wash, that we might be able to clean this whole slate up within a week or so. The tide's runnin' strong, as you know. If two-three little angles work around, why we might not need a tough crowd there no longer."

He flipped his cigarette away. "Go on to bed," he said. "Sit tight, you fool, and keep your nose clean. If you had a brain in that fat skull you'd see what a edge you're on. You're another 'un, Wash, who could mighty easy be done without. It's a point you'd be smart to remember. . . . "

So much the wan lights saw and the darkness heard in that dim hour at the end of night when Cass Gentry rode, one of six, from Triangle Town.

CHAPTER XIX

NO OWLS HOOT HERE

THEY reached their destination in the brightening dawn, and the smell of coffee greeted them. Plenty of talk would follow, but as Abel Bannister had foretold, there was little actual evidence to be uncovered at the LIG that morning.

As a matter of fact, Cass thought, there was scant desire for proof. From the general talk, every cattleman in the Valleys was fully convinced that the raiders came from the Devil's Pocket. The search collected a batch of rifle shells and revolver casings, all of ordinary make and general usage. Mudded trail-signs indicated that the foiled rustlers had bunched and headed westerly, cutting a beeline for the malpais roughs.

"Except for Ollie's crew," one puncher said, "I don't know a man who wouldn't lose himself or break his neck in that country after nightfall." This verdict met with full agreement.

Cass had duly explained to Bannister the incidents that led to the shooting of the roan, and had recovered his cached equipment. The LIG would cart his extra gear in the next wagon they sent to town. Once again, however, as with Dr. Farabaugh, he had concealed his finding of the snake-banded hat. The investigation of Gopher Face, Cass had decided, could best be started through Mr. Wash Parsons.

The morning passed uneventfully. Abel Bannister spent most of his time in private session with the owners of nearby spreads, and the result of these conferences was soon common property. Cass learned, by keeping his ears open, that the vigilantes expected to ride a hundred strong when they set forth. Subleaders had been named, and gathering places were discussed.

It was said that Bannister expected to bribe information from certain members of the Devil's Pocket crew, and that he planned some arrangement to guarantee that the Pocket would never harbor thieves again.

It was quite a tall order, Cass thought, as he bided his ease on the LIG porch and waited the dinner-call.

The Shand system of rustling, as Cass understood it, was to pounce down on a small bunch, eight-ten-twelve head, and snake 'em off fast and quiet. It was supposed that the rustlers had halfway depots where they held the stuff by day.

Under the cover of the following night they would drive by ambushed trails to the honeycombed inner valley that could only be reached through a sheer defile, called the Devil's Notch or Gap. The valley was a holding ground where the brands could be altered or botched.

No one could say for certain how the Shands disposed of their beef, though it was presumed they had connections with brand owners on the other side of the malpais who were not too proud to sniff at a bargain.

It must have been an excellent system. It had been in operation for ten years or more, and old Milo Shand had always been careful to space out his raids and to split his thefts among the various irons. Most ranchers had agreed that it was cheaper to stand the losses than to try to outwit and outfight Milo, and he might have gone on forever if Matt McHale hadn't grabbed the bit in his teeth.

Ollie Shand—or so it seemed—was working the same dodge on a much enlarged scale. Where Milo's crew had never topped five or six, the estimates of Ollie's bunch were variously totaled as high as thirty. It was said that he had sent his parties into three scattered sections in a single night. The Rocker had lost as many as two hundred head in one gobble.

So Cass heard, and much more, in the course of an idle morning.

WHEN he had eaten and said his thanks, he spoke briefly with Bannister. The Snaketrack boss had announced he would ride toward Burnt Mills very shortly, and named a rendezvous. Cass went on ahead, intending to swing on a pasear that would give him a clearer picture of what had been the Rocker layout.

From Bearpaw's map, and from the amount of talk he had heard, he had a good rough outline of the Six Valleys. A birdseye view would have shown them in the semblance of a big gnarled extra-fingered hand. The palm was a broken plateau from which the valleys pronged toward the humpbacked rise of far hills and the hazy loom of the badlands peaks beyond. It was a wild-spread section, but Cass had already begun to see its possibilities.

The Rocker had grazed the middle valleys, three of them, and the home plant stood on a rise of plain that could have been likened to the hand's knuckle-ridge. Summer range at the front door, Cass thought, and the winter larder stretched behind. He rode close enough to mark the greener squares of last year's feed fields, and the sprawl of barns and sheds and corrals and holding-pens beyond the low-lying main house.

Skeleton ranch—the boneyard of Matt McHale's ambitions.

With the sun shining brightly down, the writs and the legal attachments and the sight-bills and the loans past due didn't show their plasterings. Yet they were there, and the Rocker would sink beneath the weight of them into the same mud-hole that was swallowing many another livestock enterprise.

Changing days, Frank Irish had pro-

nounced. The sands were running out for the free-range cattle kings.

And he was probably right, for all Cass knew. New times, new notions. In another ten years this whole wild country in here might be combed and tamed. Posts and wire and plow-patches, and the smoke of chimneys rising through the hills. And if that was the shape of tomorrow, then it might be just as well that old Matthew McHale didn't live to see it.

One thing certain: he was killed just in time to save him a lot of grief and disappointment.

It would have galled him to see his Rocker as it stood, all tied around with the law's red tape, shuttered and unstocked, waiting for the final ax to fall. He wouldn't have savvied, any more than Cass did, how the busy little kingdom he had fought so hard to build could collapse so quickly and utterly.

He would still be trying to fight the law that had sold off the tag of his herds, his horse strings, and had installed a court-appointed stranger in his house to hold his other belongings safe until the rightful buzzards snatched them.

Sixty cents on the dollar, as Eli Lombard said. And what's land worth when it's bordered around by hell?

CASS shook up the big-headed chestrut, swinging toward the east along a hogback ridge. His eyes were grimly thoughtful and the rattlesnake band rubbed his hip with every saddle jounce. The nesters had scattered throughout the back valleys, but Cass had no desire to see how their three-strand wire had hacked old Matthew's erstwhile ranges.

He belonged to the old order, too, and wouldn't like seeing that.

He would take the accepted word for it that they had unloaded helter-skelter, and with the granger's usual boneheadedness had picked the unlikeliest sections for any sensible crops. More important now was the unofficial headquarters these new-come pilgrims had established.

He headed that way; that was what he had come to see.

Burnt Mills lay in the northmost valley, the smallest and roughest of the six, jutting like a crooked thumb, and Cass increased his watchfulness as he neared the vicinity. He had no expectation of danger, no inkling of what might be found ahead, but as he approached the broken land at the end of the plateau, turning to skirt a spit of timber that angled down to the traveled trail, his vigilance was rewarded.

Near the top slope of the ridge beyond the timber he glimpsed a moving sparkle. It was a flick of light, a glitter-gleam, and it came again as he stared.

In the nick of time Cass arrested the dart of his hands toward carbine. He kept the chestnut in the same leisurely pace. The glint, he was certain, was the reflection of sun from the spyglass of a sentinel outpost.

He was not overly surprised. It made him a little more eager, though, to see just what brand of nesters it was who stationed lookouts on the heights above their nesting place.

HE was waiting for Abel Bannister, shortly later, when the Snaketrack boss and his trailing riders arrived at the joint of roads near the last valley mouth. Bottles had been passing around at the LIG, and a couple of the boys were feeling frisky. There was joking and laughing as the cavalcade moved on.

Their boss was sober and determined, but willing to talk.

"It's a smart ride home," Bannister said, "and I don't expect to waste much time in here. I'll just leave word with Axton for these hoe-hands to keep their ears pulled in. It'll be dangerous travelin' by night around these parts durin' this next week or so."

"You get things fixed?" Cass asked.

Bannister grinned widely. His deep-set eyes were weary but the wag of his head was vigorous and well-satisfied. "You're doggone tootin'. I don't mind tellin' you, Gentry, that my deal's all set to pop. There'll be guns enough, and to spare, when I pass the word to ride. And that word might pass a damn' sight sooner than some are expectin'."

"I reckon it might," said Cass. "I hear you're no man to hem and haw."

"No!" said Bannister, and he slapped his hand against the hang of his holster. He was obviously pleased; Cass Gentry had said exactly the right thing and was well aware of it.

The valley road was well-traveled, heavily wheel-rutted, though there were no signs of any considerable movement since the rain. They rode half a mile between slopes that gradually bulged. The brush-choked ridges were knobby with gray rock, and at one place the road made a fresh bulge to round the slide at the base of a jag-faced fault. There was good green growth on the valley floor, but to Cass the soil looked to run mighty thin.

"Where these nesters mostly from?" he asked.

"Ever'where," said Bannister. "They're just the usual no-account run. I've seen their setups there beyond the Rocker, and I'll g'arantee not one'll last next winter. They ain't built for it."

"As the ordinary thing," said Cass, "the homestead folks I've seen run bunch-like. A big family, say, will settle relatives in together. Or else it's all Swedes or Yankees that set out in a common crowd."

Bannister shook his head. "Not here, they ain't. These are mongrel-mixed. They got acquainted after they'd moved in, and they clan at the Mills for company. This hound-face feller Axton set up a store to handle their trade, though from their looks there's none of 'em flush with money."

"Axton?" Cass frowned. "He wouldn't be—no, it might be another by the same name. These men bring their families?"

"Three-four got their women, but they mainly stood the cold alone. You'll see for yourself when we round the spur there."

They passed the shaggy spur and Cass saw the settlement of Burnt Mills—the high-porched store, the five rawboned shacks, the jumble of sheds in a bluff-backed clearing. A brook ran in the rocky bed of what once had been a larger stream, and at the edge of it was a pasture lot where a few thick-bodied horses grazed.

BURNT MILLS was placid, dozing in quiet. Not even a yapping dog came forth to hail the coming riders. Two men sat on the store steps, but they might have been wooden figures. They watched the approach with careful disregard, with lazy indifference.

One of them was the speckled, buck-toothed rider who had met Wash Parsons yesterday at Squawman's Knob, the gopher-whiskered jigaroo whose identity was on the tip of Cass Gentry's tongue if he could only speak it. A battered black hat slanted down on one eye—a hat that sported a rattlesnake band spliced by a flat stud of silver!

This was the first surprise. It raised considerable questions about the similar hat Cass had shot from a night-raider's head, and the similar hatband now in his pocket.

The second man had been pithily described by Abel Bannister. He had a hound's baggy eyes and a hound's long-nosed solemnity. Cass recognized him instantly.

He recognized them both as one of the Snaketrack riders spoke to another: "Sad one's Axton who runs the place," the puncher said. "Other 'un's named Buck Childress."

Childress! That was the name, and it was also the second surprise. It was even something of a shock to see what a sharp resemblance this fellow bore to a dead man. Tom Childress had regular teeth and an ordinary complexion, but it was plain to see—once you thought of it—that Buck was Tom's brother.

And Tom . . .

It was almost two years now since Cass Gentry had tracked Tom Childress down and killed him.

CHAPTER XX

RATTLER ON THE BAR

A WOMAN appeared in the store entrance. She struck a pose, elbow propped against the door-jamb and hand on hip, and watched them dismount. Her flax-bright hair, thickly fluffed, trailed to shoulder-length. She was dressed in sleazy black that smoothed a gloss upon her bold hip, that modeled her thigh, that notched a deep vee below her pale throat.

"Queenie," the knowing puncher muttered, and some of the others chuckled. One rider gave a soft, expressive whistle.

Abel Bannister strode toward the steps. "Hidee, Axton," he hailed. "You'll recall me, I reckon."

"Why, surely," said the sad-faced man. "How-do, Mr. Bannister. What can we do you for today?"

"I'll stand the boys a snort of your whisky first off," Bannister said. "We just stopped by to let a little bird sing."

"Well, walk right in, gents," said Axton rising. Cass thought he could detect a note of relief in the voice, and that the ugliness in the face of Buck Childress was suddenly relaxed. The woman in the doorway turned on a red-lipped smile, lifting both hands to push the spill of her hair as she stepped aside.

"Come on, Gentry," Bannister called from the top of the steps. "This is on me."

Cass could see no effect that the pronouncement of his name produced. The lank Buck Childress had turned his back to enter with the others, and Axton's sidelong glance was expressionless. Had they already been informed that he was one of the party? Had Cass Gentry's arrival been expected here?

Well, that would come out later. There would be a time for that.

"I'll first treat my long-headed friend to a drink," Cass said, slapping the chestnut's haunch. "I'll step inside directly."

He led the horse toward the brook, ignoring the pump-trough nearby. There were several details he had noted—items which bred suspicion in him. That puddle which fronted the hitchrack, for instance, might have been standing since last night's rains.

From the looks of the nearby ground, however, Cass would be willing to bet it had been formed by water fresh-doused to wipe out recent hoof-prints. That move of the girl in the door, pushing back her hair, had spelled signal if Cass ever saw one.

He was positive that Burnt Mills had been geared to handle trouble. The spyglass lookout on the upper ridge had

been posted for a purpose, and doubtless there were hideout men in nearby cover.

Buck Childress, knowing his hat would be found on the scene of last night's raid, had adopted the simple defense of banding another hat in identical fashion. Sitting on the steps with Axton, he had been prepared to face accusation. Their surprise at Bannister's mild approach had been obvious.

So much Cass knew. He could point out, moreover, that Axton, the ill-dressed backwoods storekeeper had been known as Preacher Axton, card-sharp and confidence-man, in the boom towns west, and that Buck Childress had been on the way to building up as snaky a reputation as his younger brother. But would Cass Gentry's unsupported word convince hard-headed Abel Bannister?

He doubted it.

The chestnut sniffed the brook and shook his heavy head, but Cass held him there while he stored up minor observations. One of these was the sight of a red-headed man at the window of an outlying shack, a stranger's flat-nosed face that bobbed up briefly. Another was the long shed where the horse droppings were fresh and plentiful. There were also certain indications of travel along the rubbled bed of the brook that deserved more thorough investigation.

Cass led the chestnut to the rack and entered the store.

IT was more saloon than store. Along one wall were shelves of supplies, piled sacks and stacked boxes, but the main space was bare. Crudely-nailed chairs were set around the few rough tables that fronted the slab-faced bar. It seemed to Cass that this bar-counter ran extra long, and that the stock of whiskey barrels was large for the usual out-country trade.

There were no other customers. The flaxen-haired woman was behind the bar, rolling her eyes at the punchers. She drew spigot-whisky into a tin cup and set it out for Cass.

"Drink hearty," Abel Bannister said. "This squirrel-juice'll raw your throat but it won't kill you. Drink 'er down, boys."

The woman joined them. When she put down her empty cup, she glanced at Cass squarely for the first time. Her eyes were hard, bold reckless, and Cass saw that she had polished off more than one drink today. She was the bright-haired woman Dr. Farabaugh had mentioned, no question of it. A man had risked his life to fight for her, had died for her.

"Don't you like the taste of our whisky, mister?" she asked. "Ain't it good enough, huh?"

"No," he said, not looking at her. "It's plenty good for me, sister."

He stood beside Abel Bannister. Axton hugged the counter on the other side of the Snaketrack boss, handing out a flow of oily talk. Buck Childress, at the far end of the bar, had pointedly ignored Cass since his entry.

Bannister pushed his cup aside and cleared his throat. "What I stopped for, Axton," he said, "was to hand out some advice. You can pass it on to the crowd that uses around here. The main thing is public notice that times has changed."

The bull-necked rancher spoke with harsh emphasis, frowning, and Cass had to admire his dogged, square-fisted way.

"Us ranchers ain't fools," Bannister went on. "We know more'n likely, Axton, that Ollie Shand's got friends among the nesters. There's spies who notify the Pocket crew when cattle's been moved, and where, and other suchlike.

"I don't say these men ain't been planted unbeknownst, but I want the warnin' made plain to one and all. Any skunk that rides with Shand is runnin' his neck into a noose, and the rope is likely to be pulled up short any next minute!"

OLLIE SHAND was a bug in the rancher's brain, Cass thought. In the face of absolute proof that Buck Childress rode with last night's raiders, and that Wash Parsons tied in with it, too, Bannister would probably connect them with the Devil's Pocket.

And not without reason, either, as Cass admitted. Wash Parsons could be Shand's spy in Triangle Town. Childress could be a cog in the badlands machine, for all Cass knew. Cass had other ideas, but proving them would be a man-sized order.

"A private reward's been posted," Bannister said, "for information concernin' the Pocket bunch or any side-riders. Anybody who knows any facts—what trails them sons use, what hideouts they got, who might be workin' with 'em—will be paid for same. Word can be left at the LIG or the Pothook Ranch. We'll pay a hunnerd dollars for any piece of news that's worth it."

"I'll surely shout that loud," Preacher Axton said. "Yessir, I sure—"

"You tell 'em, too," Bannister rumbled, "that this whole Valleys section is dangerous country after night, startin' from now and lastin' till further orders. The roads'll be watched, and any man who travels will need the password. Your crowd would be best off to stick at home, come dark. If they got to journey, let 'em light up with a lantern. God help 'em if they don't."

He slapped the bar. "That's what the bird sings, Axton. Let's have a last drink here before we ride."

Cass Gentry's minutes were running short. If any move was to be made, now was the time to start it. There was hidden danger in this place, Cass knew, but Bannister was a fighting man and his hands drew fighting wages. It was time for dynamite.

THE woman was serving the Snaketrack hands. Axton was droning a monologue to Abel Bannister, and Buck Childress stood lonely beyond. Cass leaned his hand on the bar, staring down at Childress as if he had suddenly recognized some familiarity. His words, however, were addressed to Axton:

"Big place you got here, mister. Mighty big place to be so out-of-way."

"Why, yes—yes." Axton grinned crookedly. "I'll need the space, though, when this country settles and business picks up."

Abel Bannister chuckled.

"What kind of business you chiefly do?" Cass asked. "From the looks of your store-sheds and dump and what boxes I can see, your biggest stock is barb wire and ammunition and whisky. Where's your plant seed and granger tools?"

"Freight travels slow into here," said Axton. "I stock as needed, and there's other stuff on the way. I sell what my customers want, mister. It ain't for me to ask how these homesteaders aim to profit. They may expect to live off their crops, or to hold their sections for natural increase in value."

It was a clever admission. Preacher Axton was a smooth one, and he had prepared himself with all the answers.

"There was talk of that latter, yes," said Bannister. "It's their legal right if they choose so. Some buzzards expected, I suppose, that the new Rocker owner might buy 'em out." He grunted explosively. "I don't see what you're drivin' at, Gentry."

"I meant," said Cass, "that this layout don't look right to me. I don't like the smell of it, nor of some I see around. I got a curiosity to know what trails lead out of here, and where they push, and what travel-tracks they'd show.

"How many of these nesters ride saddle horses? I saw fresh sign of quite a bunch out near that long shed. From the looks of that pasture, with its few poor work-plugs, it would look that a string of twenty-thirty commonly grazed there. How about it, Axton?"

The air had grown tense.

"We *did* have a extra-big night at the place last night," Axton said. "There *was* quite a few here. Is that all you'd like to know, mister? Was there anything else you found?"

"Yes," said Cass harshly. "I found this. Explain it to me, Axton—you or one of your friends.

He tossed the rattler hatband on the bar and it wriggled snakelike, unfolding.

(To be continued next week)

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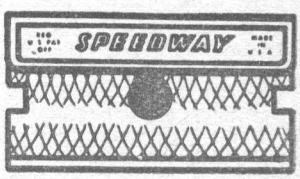

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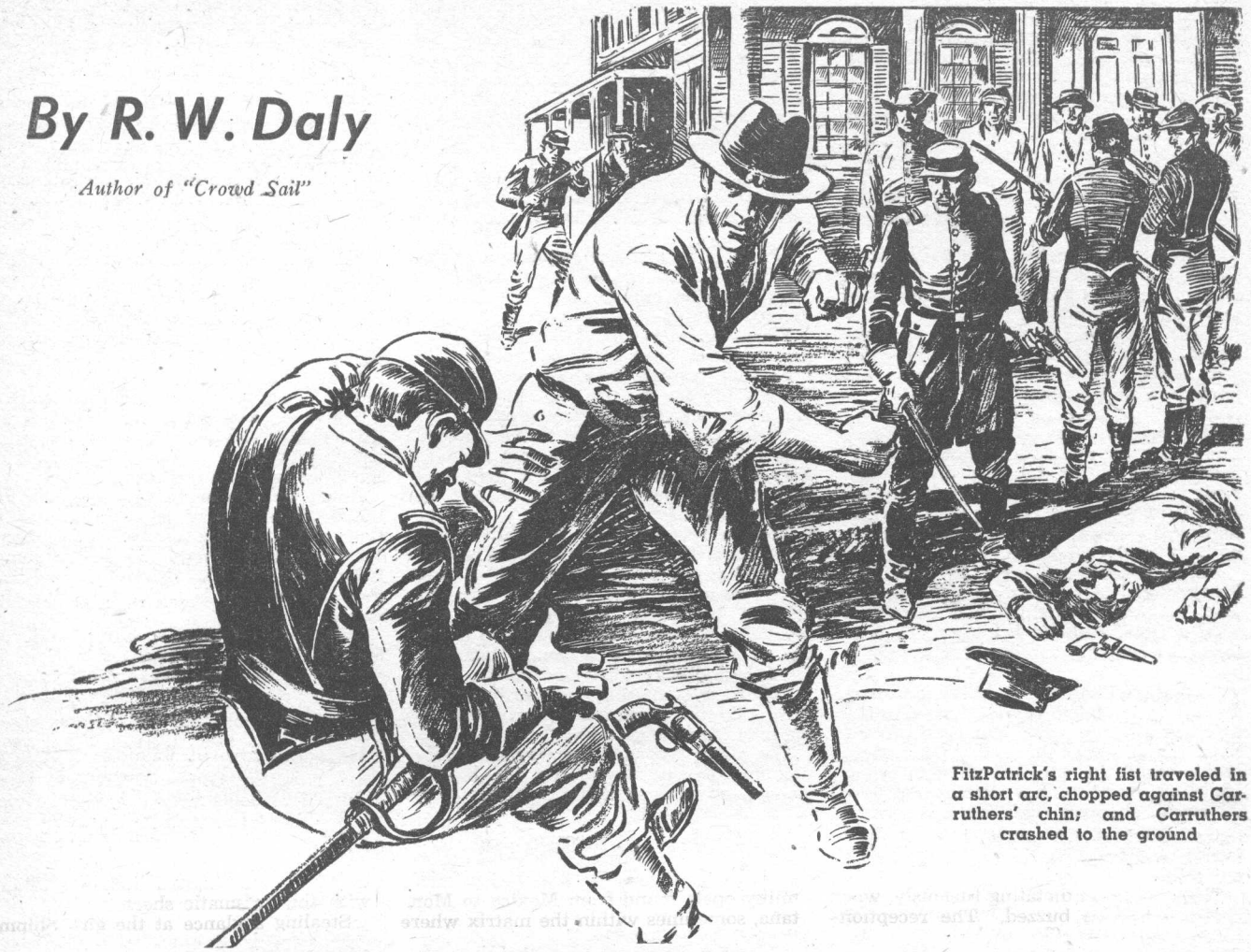

FitzPatrick's right fist traveled in a short arc, chopped against Carruthers' chin; and Carruthers crashed to the ground

A Soldier Too Long

It happened in the War between the States, but it still holds good: a week's campaigning can teach a soldier things about men—including himself—that never got into the Manual

THE heavy blue uniform cloth clung to his damp body. His thin brown lashes were unable to hold back the sweat that welled from the flushed, fair skin beneath the shading brim of his campaign hat; and his eyes stung with salty moisture.

Dust churned up from his horse's hooves and blackened his nostrils and throat. He was thirsty. His insteps throbbed where the soles of his boots curved about the iron stirrups of his saddle. He wished he could ride barefoot.

Coppery beeches overhead kept most of the golden sunlight from blistering down on him, but the leaves also stopped any breeze from moving the masses of hot, torpid air in the forest.

If the map was correct, there'd be a stream ahead and he could soak his feet and soothe the irritation of his throat. After the stream, there was a plantation.

His wide, lean body bobbed easily, effortlessly with the swelling muscles of the horse's broad back beneath his thighs. His relaxed seat in the saddle was a combination of skill and abstraction.

He was wondering why he had ever joined the cavalry. Volunteer cavalry, at that. Resentfully, he felt someone should have warned him.

The infantry, now—there was the life. Nothing to do but walk around and wait for battles. The infantry didn't have to ride far out on the flanks of the army and scour through the pregnant peace of a hostile countryside.

He had looked forward to war and now he had had four years of it. The time had passed too quickly for him to think. He was a man after six months, and he still didn't know how he stood in a man's world. Some day, when he wasn't harried by the problems of command, he'd find out.

He'd spent years reading about Hannibal, Alexander, Marlborough, Frederick, Napoleon and Washington. All about grand tactics. He laughed silently, bitterly.

There were lots of things they hadn't told him at the Point. Grand tactics! They had ignored teaching him how to keep scouts from falling into ambushes, how to find food when there wasn't any, how to keep a column of men and horses from soaking to death in a hissing rain.

He had found out those and a million other bits of knowledge by himself, and the finding had kept him from thinking about anything else.

He had learned how to maneuver divisions; so they had taken him out of school and given him a squadron, which required that he forget his training as a potential general in order to cope with the practical difficulties of his limited sphere.

He, who had understood strategy in preliminaries and phases, was forced to discard this faculty, to sublimate it in the far more important business of metamorphosing scribbled words from the colonel's pen into actuality.

The war, to him, had to be exactly where his squadron was. From the theoretical man he had shrunk to the practical man. Dimly, he perceived that it was a pity.

BESIDE him, on his right, rode his senior captain. Carruthers was an average man in size, intelligence, and experience. He wore long, drooping mustaches.

"Well, Major," Carruthers said heavily, failing to conceal a certain nervousness

which he shared with the extended file of riders stolidly jogging behind them. "I don't see any signs of Paget. Must have been false information."

He spoke as if he would will his wish into reality. He'd feel a lot more comfortable if Paget's guerrillas weren't lurking in the slumbering Georgia woods.

The major looked at him, and, being young in years, was unable for a moment to hide his thoughts. Carruthers flushed and looked away.

"We're not concerned with individuals, Captain, but with the enemy. There is no such thing as information in our case; we're finding it, not taking it."

After the one little betrayal of contempt in his eyes he had mastered himself again. He mustn't let Carruthers know how he felt about him; bad for discipline.

The regiment was composed of militia. The major was the only regular army officer in the outfit, the only professional soldier. Carruthers was a volunteer. Joining as a private, he had risen to captain with a rapidity that indicated either military skill or politics.

He had been a lawyer in civil life. Plunged violently into the boiling hell of war, his civilian nature was encrusted with a hard, ruthless brutality. In uniform, he found a sanction for a lust to kill.

At Antietam, he had slain his first man, an elderly Alabama colonel whose desire to wield a heavy saber had been greater than his physical strength. Carruthers remembered the exultant moment when his blade, swinging in a vicious, maddened circle, chopped aside his adversary's feebly opposing steel and sank its keen edge into a pulsing, corpulent neck, that gouted a fountain of crimson from its depths.

And the young trooper who had rushed up in a vain effort to save his commander, only to receive from the vigilant victor a sudden, ripping thrust that bulged his viscera out upon the saddle.

He had come through that charge unscathed. And many other charges, He wondered how he had stood his dull life before the war, which had started as a vacation, and imperceptibly became an end, a reason for existing.

And that was where he differed from the major.

The major persisted in his attempts to detach his perspective from its dependence upon its immediate viewpoint that he might see the maneuvers of his army as directed toward its proper end—the destruction of the opposing army.

Starting from this detachment, he went further and took the war itself in its character as a necessary evil: an evil which was necessary to preserve the good that was the federal government of the States. Only on that basis could the major justify his participation in the fratricide.

To him, Carruthers was bestially immoral. Therefore he maintained a cool attitude toward the ex-lawyer and his overtures for the favor of his "Pointer" superior.

HE strained his eyes to probe into a clump of bushes fifty feet ahead. He thought he had seen something move that shouldn't have been there. His fingers flew to his holstered Colts, smoothly drew and fired it in the instant that a spout of flame blew from the shrubs.

He heard a sharp, familiar droning. A man behind him cursed. The bushes threshed and cracked and then were still. Far beyond, his scouts wheeled and raced back.

"Halt!" he cried, raising his hand. "Sergeant, dismount the first troop as skirmishers." His voice was crisp, cool.

He watched a line of blue jackets sift into the woods. The rest of the troops waited in silence, carbines cocked. He reloaded the chamber of his revolver. There was a snapping of underbrush, as if somebody was running, and a volley of shots.

He caught a gleam and glanced sideways at Carruthers, leaning tensely forward, his saber resting on the pommel of his saddle.

"Put that away," the major said quietly. "There isn't room to use it here."

Sulkily, the captain obeyed, drawing his gun instead.

The commander turned to see if any of his men had been hurt. A trooper had been shot through the chest, mutely giving his life for the Union. Stupefaction and agony were in his glazing eyes.

When the major looked forward again, determination had put iron into his jaw. Two hundred men placed the preservation of their lives in his hands, and he must do his best.

After a few minutes, the skirmishers came back. They had a prisoner, a sandy-haired, gaunt, defiant youth. His clothes were ragged, rotten material torn by clawing branches. A trouser leg was stained with blood, and ripped up to the hip to accommodate a rough bandage. His face and body were emaciated.

"There was another one, sir," regretfully said the sergeant, a burly, sweating man, "but he got away."

The major returned the sergeant's salute, and looked down into the bright, steady, brown eyes of the captive.

"Your regiment?"

No answer.

The major's lips compresed. The youngster wasn't wearing anything that resembled a uniform. Not even a belt with C. S. A. on its buckle. He'd have to reply to the questions.

"You're a Confederate soldier?"

The prisoner's head inclined slightly, proudly acknowledging his allegiance. He was distracted, openly studying the situation in which chance and a good shot had placed him.

"Then tell me the name of your corps," the major said patiently. He was tightening inside. An obscure closet of military law opened in a corner of his mind and tumbled ugly phrases about franctireurs and the punishment dealt them into the consciousness of his mind.

He tried to quiet the voice of tradition by observing to himself that the fellow was obviously a soldier and not a civilian; but the voice had an answer to every objection, triumphantly reminding him that if the man was a soldier and out of uniform, he was a spy.

Still, unaccountably, unreasonably, he rebelled against the obvious. He did not wish to take the spark from the darting eyes before him. He did not desire to be a mere tool of antiquated usage. Why, this man was just about his own age.

"Are you attached to Paget's brigade?" he asked.

The young fellow smiled. "Sorry, Major," he replied. His voice was soft, and slurred the words.

"That's enough!" blurted Carruthers hoarsely. "Hang him!"

The major whimsically confused Carruthers' with the voice of doom. He gestured to a sergeant to approach and take the prisoner, who, at that movement, wrested himself free from the grasp of his captors, and twisted to run into the woods.

A pistol cracked. A round hole punched into the back of his shirt. He faltered, spinning halfway around.

Surprise, anger, accusation moved his features for a second until his legs puttily sagged and slid him forward onto the ground.

A half smile distorted Carruthers' lips. "Almost got away," he said cheerfully, holstering his smoking revolver.

THE major stared at him. The stare was much the same as that given by the Confederate, with the addition of authority.

"Why did you kill him?"

"He was escaping," Carruthers replied easily. His manner was pained and injured. He had acted as he saw fit, according to his lights and cultivated brutality. A superior place in the engine of discipline, a position where he dictated the acts of other men, had not imbued him with a sense of his own submission.

The men, veterans, were shocked by the needless slaying. The wounded prisoner could have as easily been shot in the other leg as in the back.

Angry as they were with the Reb for the death of one of their own number, they had a certain sympathy for them. To them, the ultimate unit in the game, Rebs were men like themselves and had the same interest in trying to outlast the war.

"We won't discuss it now," said the major, checking his passion in time to remember that an officer must not be publicly reprimanded. He'd discuss it later—at a court martial. He'd break Carruthers.

He looked down at the motionless body. He saw a youngster who should have been devoting his thoughts to the cultivation of enough whiskers to attack with a razor instead of skulking in an ambush to snipe at invaders. Invaders, because the major knew that his army was on the aggressive, even if the aggression was justifiable.

The prisoner had been defending his native soil; there was nothing cowardly about that.

"Forward!" he shouted.

The column once again jogged along the worn pathway. Carruthers fell back beside the trumpeter. He was mystified by the grimness in the faces of the men at whom he chanced to look. They were reflective, hating, resentful.

"It was all right," he muttered savagely to himself. But the stern profile of the major gave him cause to doubt that it was all right.

He began to think. One man had gotten away from the skirmishers. Maybe he had witnessed the shooting of his companion. Maybe even now he had crawled into another ambush from which he might avenge his comrade.

A little gimlet of fear bored into the bravado of Captain Carruthers. His cheeks turned pasty beneath his rich, limp, black mustaches. His smouldering eyes narrowed. Any bush might hide a rifle and a resolution of revenge.

He began to feel conspicuous. The wide red sword sash about his waist was an excellent target. He wasn't a small man. A careful marksman would hardly miss. A marksman who had lived in these woods couldn't miss.

A sweat of fear mixed with that of heat and bathed his body in its soggy serge. He shuddered as with a chill. He longed to get down off his horse and walk among the trees, protected by their trunks.

Only the mocking eyes of the major kept him from ramming spurs into the belly of his charger to plunge along the path until he broke into the safety of a clearing, where he could see what was about him. He was shrinkingly aware of the power of a bullet, against which the heavy, rolling muscles of his torso were

defenseless. His whole body tightened.

Despite his strength, his saber, his Colts, he was at the mercy of an ounce of lead and a few grains of powder.

It wasn't right.

AFTER an hour of torture, the squadron reached a stream; and by then, Carruthers was ready to collapse.

The major ordered a brief rest, taking off his boots to keep his promise to himself. He sat on a rock, studying his map, and dangled his feet in cooling, purling water. The other officers took the time to snatch something to eat.

Carruthers splashed into the brook. He stood in front of his preoccupied commander, waiting for some, any comment. They weren't out of the woods yet; he had the impression, a crawling of the skin, that the squadron was carefully watched.

The major didn't speak, so he took the initiative.

"We must be close to the plantation," he remarked. He hoped they were. Orders were for him to take half of the command and proceed on a tangent back to the army. He'd feel much safer near the infantry and their alert pickets.

The major didn't glance up at once; his feet were becoming comfortable, but he had a mind which couldn't enjoy the present, spending the present in contemplating the future or regretting the past.

He anticipated things. He had been watching for the brook that he might soothe his aching feet; and they had come to the brook. Now he had to fasten his mind on another distant object.

He didn't want to. He sensed vaguely that the future was full of men like Carruthers who took advantage of their chances to be inhuman. The future was charged with blood and suffering.

He had heard, indeed could see, that the general's march to the sea would split the Confederacy, already split in the West, into two, allowing each half to be doubled on and beaten in turn. The war would be so much closer to the end. Those grand men, Lee and Johnson, couldn't hold on much longer. It was impossible.

But, he reflected, it had also been impossible two autumns ago. The war was still going on. These men overcame difficulties, impossibilities.

He was very, very tired. Maybe some day this would be over.

"At the end of this raid, Captain, you may consider yourself under arrest."

"He had killed one of our men."

"He was a prisoner."

Carruthers sneered as openly as he dared. "You're squeamish, sir."

"He was a prisoner," the major repeated coldly.

Carruthers went back to his horse.

Refreshed, the squadron remounted and jingled along their way.

The woods began to thin. A scout came back to report that a deserted group of buildings was immediately ahead. The major received the news quietly, detaching a troop as an advance guard. They could not find a trace of the enemy.

THEY came to the edge of the woods. Five hundred yards away, a large, rambling, U-shaped house sprawled on top of a slope. The style was old Colonial, with a long portico.

It had once been magnificent, but now retained only the gentility of its designer and inhabitants. Storm and wind and rain had worked upon its boards and paint, aging virgin white into weather-beaten gray.

It was silent, windows closed and masked with lace.

The patrolling squadron waited while their lieutenant walked boldly up the steps to the door and banged the knocker. They watched the door open; saw the lieutenant bow hesitantly and then disappear into the yawning hallway.

"What the devil?" muttered the major, eyes narrowing.

The door opened again, a figure in blue appeared and becked to the squadron that it was all right to proceed, remaining in the doorway, a glass in his hand.

The major was suspicious. "Carruthers," he said, "take over now, but wait until I've reached that porch before you head south toward the army."

"What's wrong?"

"That officer should rejoin his troop," the major explained, "even if he does like mint juleps."

Seventy men clattered out of the woods after him, cursing the intensified heat of the sun in the clearing. The air shimmered. He loosed his saber in its scabbard and automatically swung his belt so that his pistol was ready to hand.

The mansion was too quiet, too innocent, to be quiet and innocent. It was excellently situated to be a fortress, a trap, with long, unobstructed ranges on all sides.

With a wave of the hand, he ordered his men to remain in their extended double column rather than close up into fours.

They came up to the idling advance troop, a hundred feet from the house, when it happened.

THE blue figure in the doorway threw away the glass and shrilled the rebel yell. Instantly, rifles poked from every shutter. The side of the house was filmed in white smoke.

Yankee troopers tumbled fatly from their saddles. A branding iron scorched the major's left shoulder. His arm dangled uselessly.

Having anticipated treachery, he was prepared to meet it. There was only one thing to do. They'd have to go through Hell to get this close again. Nor could he withdraw and subdue the house from a distance: it would take too much time.

"Draw arms!" he roared to his stricken cavalrymen. "Charge!"

His horse bounded across the short distance to the porch, pulling up sharply at the breast-high planking. The major stood in the stirrups and jumped over the balustrade, losing his balance and measuring his full length upon the pine planks just as a second volley ripped from the windows.

He stumbled to his feet and dashed at a round eye of steel. It erupted at his waist; but he was able to deflect the barrel with a sweep of his saber, and the bullet shrieked past him.

Then he was safe, flattened against the peeling wall hard by a window. Feebly gripping his gun in his left hand, he broke the glass panes with his sword, and hacked at the wooden framework.

His men came up.

Heavy Colts revolvers drove the defenders from the windows. Sabers made short work of flimsy glass and wood.

The major mechanically shot a man lunging at him with a bayonet as he legged over a windowsill. He wondered at the simplicity of taking life.

A squeeze on a trigger, a slight kick in the palm of a hand, and all that had gone to make a man—life, family, friends, religion, education,—all vanished in the acrid tang of burnt gunpowder, leaving behind a graceless bulk devoid of all potentialities save that of decomposition.

Tonight, trying to sleep, he'd see that spurt of flame and answering spurt of blood.

He stepped quickly over the sill into the interior of the house. Parrying a thrust with his sword, he coolly knocked his assistant unconscious with a sharp blow on the head from his pistol.

His shoulder throbbed. He looked around. The room, well furnished, was brightened by oblique rays of sun light.

A handful of shadowy figures ferociously flung themselves upon the attackers, but the blue jackets poured into the house in overwhelming numbers as Carruthers brought his demi-squadron into action.

"They're too many, boys," gasped a voice. "We're licked."

The fight was over as quickly as it had begun. A dozen or so Confederates sullenly dropped their weapons and suffered themselves to be huddled into a group.

The major looked at his prisoners, the bodies on the carpet. He started to speak. His heart stabbed convulsively, blackness stealthily flowed through his brain, and he quietly toppled onto his face.

HE FOUGHT his way back out of a buzzing void. He opened his eyes. He was on his back, staring up into a blue, cloudy sky. He forced himself to sit up, the movement almost sending him back into the hazy reaches. His shoulder was crudely bandaged, his tunic gone, and his shirt ruined.

"What's going on?" he demanded hoarsely, seeing men working over a fire.

"Captain Carruthers ordered the house burned, sir," explained his sergeant.

The major got to his feet. "How many did we lose?" he asked softly. His sergeant told him. It wasn't so bad, considering. Then he walked toward the prisoners.

"What the devil!" he exclaimed, and turned to his sergeant. A woman was in the group. "Was she—"

"Yes, sir. Right in the middle of things.

"Was she harmed?"

The sergeant grinned. "She's just mad, sir."

Ignoring the men, he went over to the woman. She was elderly, perhaps sixty.

"I'm Major FitzPatrick," he said politely. "Eleventh Ohio Cavalry."

She frigidly acknowledged the self-introduction by raising her eyebrows. There was a barrier between them that she wouldn't cross, not even at the expense of courtesy.

He tried again. "Mrs. Stevenson?"

"Yes." She spoke as though this barbarous Yankee would torture answers from her if she refused to give them.

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

"Must you burn my house?" she asked suddenly, after a moment of speculation and compromise. She didn't have to say that it was all that remained to her. He could judge that from the poverty of flesh and color in her cheeks. He was somehow proud of her pride and calmness.

Carruthers, coming up, overheard the question. "You harbored rebels," he said roughly. "Take the consequences."

FitzPatrick bit his lip. Many, many troubles of the past few years stretched taut and broke under a surge of emotion.

He looked back over his experience, seeing dead men everywhere; men stricken on battlefields, cut down in little, out-of-the-way skirmishes, hung as spies. Men, who had been Americans, killing each other, because they disagreed in political and social ideas.

But they killed according to rules. People fired from houses; well, then the houses were burned.

"Damn you, Carruthers," he said, dispassionately, "get your men and clear out of here." He was amazed that he did not

smash his fist into that righteous face.

Mrs. Stevenson was surprised, but stoically awaited the outcome.

Carruthers smiled. He suspected that he had stumbled upon an advantage and purposed to follow it to the hilt. "The house must be burned," he said. "That's law."

As beseechingly as her principles permitted, Mrs. Stevenson stared at the young officer who was befriending her. There was no longer a barrier. She trusted him. That angry look in his blue eyes made him worthy of trust.

She had sons: sons with Hood and Hill. She understood men. So she perceived that this tenseness wasn't a personal antagonism: the Yankee major was too fine for pettiness; it went deeper than social dislike.

She was right.

Carruthers was revealed to FitzPatrick as the personification of the system that legalized terror and cruelty. A system with rules. Iron rules that couldn't yield to humanity because humanity was a national prerogative—nationality, an accident of birth, was an accident important enough to make a science and profession of killing.

And he was practicing that profession.

FitzPatrick's thoughts were far away from a magnificent, aged mansion and a magnificent, aged lady; yet curiously, he was aware of what Carruthers had said. The habits of years made him reply as a commander preserving his authority.

"I know the law, Captain. Your men are waiting."

FACING court martial, Carruthers sought any opportunity to discredit his superior. He sensed the major's perturbation and determined to force the issue.

"You're wounded, sir," he said, with elaborate courtesy. "If you don't mind, I'll stay and—"

"I do mind," FitzPatrick interposed. "Go to your command."

The men close by, Yanks and Rebs alike, gravely witnessed the dispute. They weren't often spectators at an officers' quarrel.

Carruthers didn't move.

"I'm ordering you to go," FitzPatrick said, evenly. "Take the prisoners and wounded."

"My duty is here," Carruthers retorted. "The house must be burned."

"You're giving me no alternative, Mr. Carruthers. Place yourself under Captain Hardy's orders. You're relieved from duty."

"What!"

FitzPatrick ignored him, addressing his sergeant. "My compliments to Captain Hardy," he said. "Please direct him that I desire him to accept Captain Carruthers' responsibility."

Outraged, Carruthers leaped forward, clawing for his Colts. His jaw was slack. His lips writhed with furious gibberish. His gun came into his hand. He meant to kill.

FitzPatrick measured the distance. His right fist traveled in a short arc, chopped against a stubbly chin. He put the repression of years into the blow, wincing with pain as his wounded shoulder protested the strain.

Carruthers stopped in his tracks. A smile flickered on his puzzled, relaxed face. He slowly crashed to the ground.

FitzPatrick was strangely serene. He looked at his sergeant, who was semi-delirious with approval. "Revive him," he said. He exulted with the exultation of a galley slave when the chains are riven from his ankles. Carruthers had been a symbol, and he had crushed the symbol.

Then his satisfaction curdled. Captain Hardy, a trim, efficient officer, came to him and saluted.

"I'm pleased to comply with your request, sir," he said, formally, happy that he had been distinguished by a superior whom he admired. "Any further orders?"

FITZPATRICK felt a contraction of his soul. He knew now how he stood in the world. He couldn't escape. The acts of years bound him. The pride of his family shackled him. He was left in the midst of it, complete with all the trappings.

He was an officer and received the deference due his rank; he was looked up to as an authority, a cog who rotated smaller cogs in their spheres. They wouldn't fail him; he couldn't fail them.

"Take the prisoners," he said, quietly, "and leave immediately."

"The lady, sir?"

"No, Mr. Hardy. She remains."

Feeling rebuffed, Hardy stiffened, saluted, and as quickly as possible took his troops away toward the southeast, an officer holding the dazed Carruthers seated upright.

FitzPatrick watched them go, a poignant, bitter canker gnawing at his spirit. He couldn't be free. He had been a soldier too long. He had, too many times in the course of duty, caused death. True, he had been impersonal about it; but suddenly he saw that this detached manner was as horrible as the impassioned fury of Carruthers; both achieved the same end, both destroyed.

The horsemen disappeared into the woods.

Mrs. Stevenson passively waited for him to speak. In her eyes he saw that she knew much of what had been in his mind. She smiled to give him strength and courage in his resolution, if he had resolved to break.

"I can't," he said, gently shaking his head. "I'm in too deep. But I won't burn your house." To Hell with the Colonel; it was the least he could do.

"Thank you," she replied, graciously. "I'm sorry." He caught her meaning. "Won't you let me take care of your shoulder?"

He hesitated to accept her invitation. Loitering in enemy territory was dangerous. Still, the men could use a rest, and his shoulder did hurt. He called to his remaining captain, who ran over to him.

"Don't unsaddle," he directed. "Stand to, ready to leave. This is rather exposed. In case anything happens, gallop to the woods."

"And you, sir?" asked the captain.

"Don't wait for me. I'm a fool to take a risk like this; therefore, I'll take the consequences alone, if there are any."

He spoke convincingly, but didn't mean it. He wasn't a fool for having been kind. Remembering this lady would give him something to continue on.

He followed her into the mansion, past the hallway where his lieutenant had been knocked unconscious while a Reb took his place. Through the living rooms where they had fought. Back to a quiet sitting room, where she made him wait while she got some cloth and water.

Alone, he began to think again.

He was idly brooding over the view of the ravished, barren fields, when she returned. "How does it look in the spring?" he asked absently.

She smiled, and set to work on his shoulder.

THEY didn't speak because they didn't have to. He was at peace, not with himself, but with the world. He could never be at peace with himself. He had done too much.

But he felt clean: as clean as the cotton with which she swabbed his purpling wound. The army had him, but there was now a part of him which it could never have. It was his to keep until he could have the freedom to nurse it into vitality, into a force which could carry him to the end.

It had almost been extinguished, but it was still there, or he would have been incapable of appreciating the charm of these few moments.

When she was done, she threw away his shirt and helped him into a fresh, whole one. He knew without asking that it belonged to a son of hers. Gingerly he put it on. She held out his bloody tunic.

He smiled suddenly.

"After it's over," he said, "may I come back?"

She nodded, pulled down his head, and kissed his forehead.

He gently disengaged himself, and went back through the empty house.

Suddenly he heard firing, and in the instant realized what had happened. That ambusher who had escaped— he had reached Paget, and now the demi-squadron was surrounded.

He ran to the open door, grateful to see his men, faithful to orders, bolting for cover under a whistling hail of Minie balls. He reached the porch. He could see the rifles fringing the woods.

He looked for his horse. It was held by his sergeant. He raced to its side. As he flung himself up into the saddle, he saw a group of men run from the underbrush.

"Ride!" he shouted to his stubborn enlisted man, who waited for him to get started.

One of the men dropped to his knees. He could see the muzzle bear down on him.

Strangely, FitzPatrick didn't care, not even when the slug tore through his silk sword-sash and snuffed out his animal life, hurling him beneath his cursing sergeant's horse.

He was content. He had all eternity to be himself.

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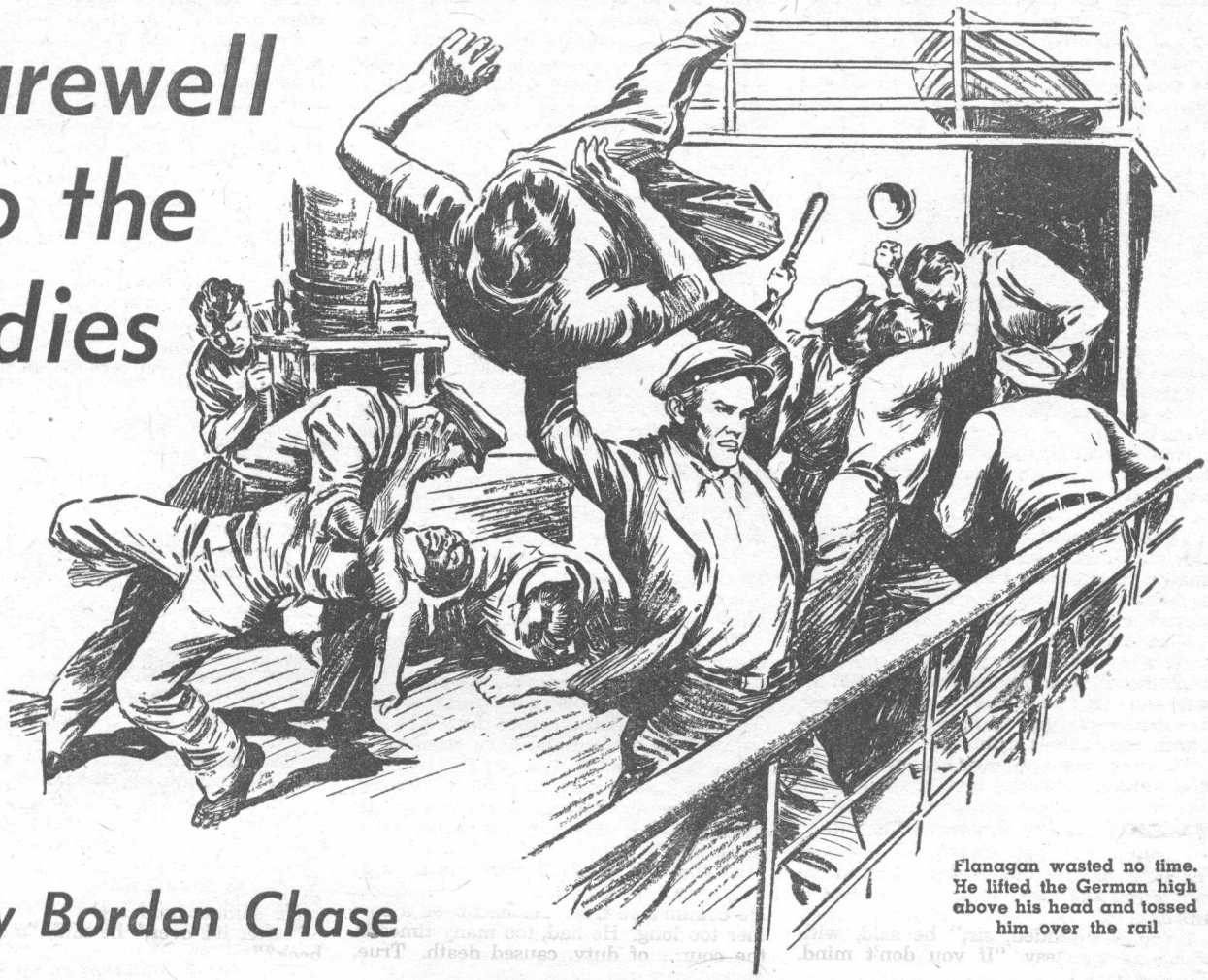


Flanagan wasted no time. He lifted the German high above his head and tossed him over the rail

By Borden Chase

CHAPTER XXV

LOVE SHOULD WEAR ARMOR

MARK nodded and went to his cabin. It seemed his head had scarcely touched the pillow before Olsen's hand was on his shoulder.

The cook had made coffee and Mark dressed quickly. He went to the cabin and sipped a cup of the steaming liquid. A moment later he heard a step and turned to find Connie coming toward the table.

Her hair was tousled and her eyes not quite open; and when Olsen brought the coffee she yawned. Mark thought she looked like a youngster wakened an hour too early from sleep.

"'Mornin'," she said. "How's the big deep-sea diver today?"

"Couldn't be better," said Mark. "But what brings you out of your bunk so early?"

"Oh, I just couldn't sleep."

"Go on! You're half asleep now."

"Am not!" said Connie. She rubbed her eyes. "And if you insist that I am, then you're no gentleman."

Mark laughed. "Could it be you've decided to stand a watch with me?"

"Does it look as if I intend to do some moonlight swimming?"

"That might be the answer."

"Oh, shush up!" said Connie. "It's too early to be clever and I don't like to sound stupid. Finish your coffee and let's relieve Red. Tanya's with him and he's probably bored to tears."

Mark grinned at her and said with considerable emphasis:

"Yeah—I can just imagine."

Mark put down his cup and followed Connie to the deck. The schooner had swung wide on her chain and Tanya and Red were leaning against the after rail, looking toward the island. Flanagan turned quickly at the sound of Connie's footsteps.

"Ahoy, the watch!" he called. "Faith, 'twas but a moment past that you left for your bunk, Connie. Time flies in the Indies, so it does."

"It was four hours ago," said Connie pertly.

"Was it, now?" laughed Red. He took Tanya's arm and headed toward the cabin. "In that case 'tis time I had me coffee and caught up with a bit of sleep. Keep a sharp eye on the island, mates, and I'll see you the moment it's light."

Connie made a snoot at him and seated herself on the forward hatch. Mark walked the deck for a time, glancing occasionally toward the island. The quarter moon had reached the zenith and was dipping toward its home in the sea. As it went it built a silver path across the Caribbean to the battered bow of the *Wanderer*.

CONNIE sat with her knees hunched up, her chin on her hands and her eyes on the moonstreak. As Mark passed her she yawned. He circled the schooner and passed again. And again Connie yawned.

"Having trouble keeping awake?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then why not go below?"

"I'm on watch, stupid!"

Mark grinned. "Don't you trust me?"

"Yes! And that's just the trouble," said Connie. She glanced up at the stars. "A schooner in the tropics, a moon in the sky, a soft wind blowing across the Caribbean—and I get stuck with a man any girl could trust!"

Mark walked to the hatch and sat down. He put an arm about her shoulders. "Is this any better?"

"A little, but not much. Say something nice."

Mark shook his head. "I've tried a dozen times. It sounds good when I say it to myself but when I try to say it to you—well, it seems stupid."

"What, for instance?"

"Oh, everything, Connie. I've just—well, I've never had the opportunity to talk with a girl like you."

"That's better," said Connie. "Now tell me why you've never made love to a girl like me."

"Too busy, I suppose. It isn't so many years ago when I was working for fifteen

The first installment of this six-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for February 1

a week as a clerk. Since then I've gone a long way, but it took every moment of my time to get there."

"To get where?"

"I run Dufresne Industries. At least, I did until I made this trip."

"So what?"

"Well, I thought that was something."

Connie put both hands on his cheeks, held his face firmly and kissed him squarely on the lips. It was a long kiss and Connie did a thorough job of it. When she was finished, she drew a deep breath, folded her hands demurely in her lap and looked at Mark.

"Now what do you think?" she asked. "You, and your stupid Dufresne Industries!"

Mark looked at the stars. "Ah, me!" he said. "To think of the time I've wasted!"

Connie's laugh was a silver thing. "Oh, Mark, you sound like Red Flanagan."

"Do I?"

"Exactly."

"Then perhaps there's some hope for me, Connie. If I stay close to Red for another few weeks I may learn the way to tell you the things I've had in my mind since the day we met."

"What things?"

"That your voice plays in my ears and keeps me awake when I should be sleeping. It's a sweet voice, Connie, sweeter than any tropic breeze that blows across the Caribbean."

His arm went about her slim waist and drew her toward him. Connie tilted her head and her eyes were bright as she rested her cheek against his.

FOR a moment Mark held her in silence, and then: "I've often looked at the tips of your ears and envied their closeness to your cheeks. And your hair—soft as the strands of a gossamer web caught in the rays of the setting sun. Beautiful hair, Connie—"

He stopped and turned his head slightly. Connie waited. Waves rippled against the hull of the silent *Wanderer*. Still Connie waited. A night bird called. Connie turned her cheek to touch Mark's.

"My hair—" she said. "Go on, Mark."

"I—"

"Yes?"

"I thought I heard a sound. Like an oar hitting the water."

Connie's lips grew a pout. "You were talking about my hair."

"But I heard a sound, Connie."

"My heart, silly. It's knocking against my ribs."

Mark grinned. "This was a splash."

"Then it was a flying fish," said Connie impatiently. She lifted her lips. "Let's not talk."

Connie was lovely and Mark was human—even as you and I. He drew her close and his lips met hers while the rest of the world went spinning by in a mad procession of night and sea and stars that had lost their way in the heavens.

A moment passed. Perhaps a score. Time was a foolish thing.

Then Mark heard a laugh that was almost a grunt. He dropped his arms and he whirled about to find a man with a gun in his hand.

"So sorry," said the man. "You will say noding—both of you."

He was a tall man, blond and heavy-set with a Heidelberg scar across his cheek and a smile that stamped him a cynic. He wore an officer's cap with an anchor emblem, a high-necked blue sweater and dark trousers.

The hand that held the gun was large and Mark noticed it didn't tremble.

Over the stern came additional men, silent creatures out of the night. They jumped to the deck like hurrying shadows and came toward their leader.

Mark drew a long breath. His stomach felt as if it had been on ice for a week. The gun was very close. Then he braced his legs and doubled one fist, and his voice was filled with rage.

"Like hell you will!" he cried. He tried a looping right. "Run, Connie! Call Red —the crew!"

"Ach! Dummkopf!" said the officer.

He lifted his gun and brought the barrel down on Mark's forehead.

CHAPTER XXVI

MORNING, CAPTAIN!

CONNIE'S voice came from far away, saying the same thing over and over. Mark tried to catch the words. But his head hurt. His back hurt. Everything hurt.

The voice was closer now: "Mark, dear, are you hurt badly? Mark—"

He opened his eyes and blinked. Then he closed them again. The world was on fire. It must be. He could see the red blaze even through his tightly closed lids.

But that was stupid. Water doesn't burn and he was on the *Wanderer*. He tried again. This time the red flame had rounded to the shape of a monstrous ball.

The sun! It flared across the water and painted the surface an angry crimson.

Mark was angry, too. At the moment he wasn't quite sure why he was angry. His head was raging. He tried to lift one hand to it. The hand wouldn't move. He tried the other. They were tied behind his back and he was stretched at full length on a hatch.

He heard Connie's voice again. Then he remembered. That officer with the gun—the men climbing aboard the *Wanderer*.

"Oh, hell," said Mark wearily. He turned his head and looked at Connie. "What a mess I've made!"

Sudden relief came into her eyes. She, too, was resting on one shoulder, hands fastened behind her back. Beyond was Red Flanagan, seated on the edge of the hatch. His hands were lashed securely and so were those of the crew.

Mark looked toward the island. The *Wanderer* had been moved into the mouth of the small bay and in the distance Mark could hear the sound of pneumatic drills biting into rock. A dust cloud grew from the side of the cliff and at times there came the rumble of a blasting.

Competent men, these Germans. It hadn't taken them long to put their machinery to work. Mark's teeth clamped firmly on his lower lip as he shook his head.

"Are you all right, dear?" asked Connie.

"Yes," said Mark dully. "I see the Heinies moved in and made a fool of me. A fine thing! I ought to have my head examined."

"Captain Schmidt says there's a doctor on the island. He'll put stitches in it for you."

"I don't mean that."

Mark scowled, and even that was painful. He winced.

"Well, I do."

Mark grunted. "Is he the guy that slugged me?"

"Who?"

"Captain Schmidt."

"Yes."

"Louse," said Mark. He turned his head and looked at Flanagan. "Well, what do you think of your mate, now?"

RED dropped a slow lid. "It could happen to any man, Mark—though I doubt many would have the courage to jump a gun. You owe Captain Schmidt a debt for not pulling the trigger."

"I owe him a debt, all right," said Mark. He nodded toward the cabin. "Is Hugo still in his bunk?"

"They've not harmed him," said Flanagan. "He'll be on deck later."

"Why?"

"To go ashore with the rest of us."

"Prisoners?"

Red bobbed his head. "So it seems, mate. I don't savvy the vile language well enough to get the whole of it, but Tanya sold them a bill of goods with that most persuasive voice of hers."

"Tanya, eh?" said Mark. "Where is she now?"

"Having breakfast with Captain Schmidt, no doubt."

Connie wriggled across the hatch and put her cheek next to Mark's. "Your face is flushed and you'll work up a fever. Just lie quietly and—"

"Connie, please!" said Mark. "There's a time and place for everything. This is neither!"

"Is that so?" said Connie quickly, and her eyes went round. "If I had one hand free, Mark Hallam, I'd—"

Red Flanagan's laugh chased a gull from the rail. "Look out for these redheads, mate. They're dangerous ladies, both."

Mark tried for a smile. "You say Tanya and the captain are at breakfast?"

"Most likely."

"What happens after that?"

"Oh, we'll be dumped ashore and Tanya will sail back to see how the *Sphinx* is getting along. She left Velasquez and his men under guard while her engineroom crew tried to patch up the bearings. If they can be repaired quickly the *Sphinx* will go on about her business. If not, me lady will look for another yacht."

"And what of Velasquez and his men?"

"If they're lucky," said Red quietly, "they'll join us as prisoners on the island. If not, they'll walk the floor of the Caribbean without the aid of a diver's rig. These people mean business, Mark."

THERE was silence for a time. Mark tugged at his bonds once, then gave it up as useless. He recalled some of the clever escapes he had seen in the movies.

There was that business of using your teeth to unfasten your partner's lashings. Not a bad idea, except for the fact that Mark's teeth would probably come loose before the knots in the lines did.

And then there was the square-faced Heinie with the gun who passed slowly along the deck. He'd have something to say about any teeth tricks.

A sharp piece of metal—that was another gag. But there wasn't any sharp piece of metal around. And Mark couldn't get to the matches in his pocket to burn through the ropes. Besides, he had never been a Boy Scout.

Mark eased onto his back and gave the whole thing up as a bad job.

"Could I borrow one of your shoulders, Connie?" he asked at length. "If we sit back and sort of lean against each other, we might be a little more comfortable."

"You're a snob," said Connie. "You're only nice when you want something."

"You'd get as much benefit out of the arrangement as I."

"Oh, a business deal, eh?"

"Call it that if you like."

"I don't like," said Connie. She wriggled her legs and pulled her shoulders

from the hatch. "I don't need any partner."

"You will when your back starts to ache."

"Oh, all right, Mr. Dufresne Industries! Sit up and put your shoulders against mine. I'm just dying to hear all about the Excess Profit Tax—or something!"

Mark grinned and wished he hadn't. Each time he moved his face pain leaped through his head. He got his shoulders against Connie's and for a time they sat quietly.

Silence grew monotonous. Mark turned his head and said, "Hello, you."

"Sssh!" said Connie. "I'm thinking."

"About what?"

"Tanya Padilla. Wouldn't it be wonderful if she tried to make breakfast for Captain Schmidt and used lye for the biscuits instead of flour?"

"You can think of the damnedest things!"

"Well, it's a pleasant thought, anyway."

Mark shook his head wearily, and as he did there came a shout from the bow. The square-faced man with the rifle ran forward. Others followed him. There was a moment of quick conversation and a seaman ran to the cabin.

Captain Schmidt came on deck and Tanya followed. She was carrying glasses. The officer took them from her and leveled them along the sun streak.

"Drei Schiffe!" he said curtly.

"Dampfschiffe?" asked Tanya.

"Nein! Schooners!"

Red Flanagan was sitting erect as he looked under the sun toward the horizon. Mark leaned forward, hunched his knees and bumped across the hatch to Red's side.

"What does he say?"

"Three ships coming our way," answered Red and he chuckled. "The captain says they're schooners, and faith, I'm sure he's right."

"Schooners?" cried Mark.

"Aye! Velasquez has given the *Sphinx* the slip and now he's come for his *Wanderer*. And he's not come alone, by the looks of things; he's brought Pederson, Griffith and Burke along for company."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SWEDE IS A SAILOR

THE morning's red sun had promised wind and now it started to blow; hardly a gale, but a spanking breeze that feathered the tops of the hurrying waves that raced past the mouth of the bay.

Mark squinted his eyes and looked into the sun. Beneath the rim of the fiery ball he saw three silhouettes: miniature ships with their tiny masts weighted down by a spread of canvas.

Red called them by name: the *Dancer*, the *Gull*, and the *Leprechaun;* and his laugh was a shout as he turned his head to look at Tanya Padilla.

"The top o' the morning to you, me lady," he said. "I see you've got company coming."

"They're fools," said Tanya. "And so are you, if you think they can take this schooner."

"I wouldn't gamble on that," said Red. "I've seen Velasquez angry before, and faith, the man is no angel. If you'll take my tip for what it's worth, you'll not be here when he comes acalling."

Tanya came to the edge of the hatch and looked down at Red. Her eyes were worried, "Have you forgotten the three-inch gun on the island?"

"It had slipped me mind," said Red quickly. "Ah, me! You've the devil's own luck, Tanya, darling. The setup is perfect. Made to order for the likes of your friends. They'll enjoy this, shelling three ships that can't shell back. It should be almost as much sport as bombing youngsters at school."

"Thank you," said Tanya. She seated herself beside him.

"Oh, you're welcome," said Flanagan. "And don't be distressed. 'Tis the fortune of war and luck as well. The men who sail the Caribbean are used to such things and they'll laugh as they die."

"I don't want them to die, Red."

"Don't you, now?"

"No."

"Then why not stop the slaughter?"

Tanya shrugged. "You should know better than to ask that." She pointed to Captain Schmidt who was giving orders to his men.

"He has a country, too. A few dozen sailors more or less won't stand in the way of his duty. Still, if you can think of any way—"

RED looked at Mark and his eyes asked the question. Mark twisted his mind for the answer. A dozen came but none was good.

No use to ask Tanya to set them free. Even if she could, Mark Hallam and Red Flanagan would stand little chance against the men who had taken the *Wanderer*.

These men had guns and knew how to use them; they weren't in a mood for nonsense.

Mark shook his head. He looked aft and saw a pulling boat heading toward the shore. Captain Schmidt had sent his orders.

"Looks as if it's all over but the shooting," said Mark at length.

"It does that," said Red slowly. "And now I know how Judas felt. Those men are trying to help me."

His wide shoulders drooped and he hunched them forward as he looked toward the sea. The schooners were growing as the minutes passed. Coming close and always closer.

Mark shut his eyes and turned away, but he couldn't shut his mind. He looked at the island and saw men on the cliff. The drills had stopped and the bay was silent except for the song of the wind in the stays and the sibilant wash of the waves.

Captain Schmidt had gone forward to watch the sea. He stood near the rail with his glasses leveled and waited with stolid patience.

The schooners tacked and went off on a reach, then came about in a slanting line like three ancient men o'war. With all sails set and sheets close hauled, each carried a bone between her teeth as she raced across the wind.

"How long will it be?" asked Mark. "They must be well within range of that gun."

"They are," said Red. "But the men at the gun are taking no chances. Those schooners are fast in a wind such as this. The gunners will wait till they reach the bay. No chance of a miss, and plenty of time to finish all three before they could get away."

Connie had bumped across the hatch and taken a place at Mark's shoulder. Now she closed one eye and opened it wide, then looked at both men wisely. She turned her head no more than a trifle and rolled her eyes toward the shrouds.

Mark looked quickly. Red took his time. Both saw that Tanya had left the hatch and was standing close to a signal halyard. She seemed to be pondering.

"Now what on earth is me lady to do?" whispered Red.

"Nothing good, I'll bet," said Connie.

Tanya crossed the deck. She seated herself beside Red and reached up to unknot the blue scarf that was wound about her hair. She spread it across her knees and dipped into Red's hip pocket.

He looked at Tanya sharply as she took out his white handkerchief, casually tore it in two strips and placed them diagonally across the blue scarf.

"Got any pins, Connie?" she asked.

"Act your age! Where would I have pins?"

Tanya turned to Red. "Have you?"

He glanced at the lapel of the linen jacket. "It seems Velasquez has the sailors' habit. There's some driven down through the top seam."

"Thanks," said Tanya and helped herself.

"Now what?" asked Red.

TANYA waited until she had pinned the white strips to the blue scarf. "Diagonal white stripes on a blue background—isn't that the flag signal for *Danger Ahead?"*

"'Tis the other way about, but that's like a woman," said Red. He chuckled as he looked at the improvised flag. "And what would you be up to with that?"

"If I can get it aloft, Velasquez may see it and put about."

"A long chance but worth the try," said Red. "Have you thought what the good Captain Schmidt will do to you when he finds you playing both sides, me dangerous lady?"

Tanya smiled. "I have a fairly good idea."

She stood up. And as she did the harsh crack of a three-inch gun sounded from the island. A puff of smoke drifted up from the cliff. A shell broke the water just over the bow of the leading schooner.

"Too late," said Red. "And now the dance begins."

Very slowly Tanya tore the white strips and dropped them onto the deck. She sat next to Red and rewound the bright scarf about her hair, knotting it firmly over one ear. Then she rested her chin upon her hands and watched the schooners.

The gun spoke again and this shot went home. It splintered a mast on the flying *Gull* and brought her canvas down. A third hit her hull just off the bow and let the water in.

"'Tis murder!" cried Red. "But look at the *Dancer*—and look at the *Leprechaun!* They've not changed course. They're driving ahead. Driving straight for the mouth of the bay!"

"Are they mad?" yelled Mark. "Don't they want to live?"

"I doubt if they care about that," said Red. His eyes were bright and his lips were back from two rows of even teeth.

"They're coming in! They're trying to close! Ah, mate, look yonder at men of the sea and be glad you're one of the breed!"

He struggled erect and opened his mouth. The cords were like ropes on each side of his throat and he strained at the lashings that held him.

"Pederson! Burke! 'Tis Flanagan here! Make for the schooner, you sons of the devil, and we'll have a waltz with the Huns!"

HIS voice roared out across the waves to challenge the sound of the distant gun that was firing from the cliff. The *Leprechaun* staggered as a shell hit

her square and tore away the wheel.

A scarecrow figure was hurled aloft and Flanagan groaned in his chest.

"I'll pay them, Burke! I swear I will!" he cried as he strained his arms. Then he swung about and his flaring eyes looked straight at Tanya Padilla. "Get me a knife, you woman from Hell, or I'll wait for you beyond the grave and twist your lovely throat!"

"And have you killed?" said Tanya softly. She pointed forward toward the rail where Captain Schmidt was standing. "He'd put a bullet through your head before you had taken three steps."

The *Gull* was sinking by the bow and the *Leprechaun* had walked into irons. Another shell brought her foremast down. The next split the bow of the crippled ship and her stern commenced to lift.

But the *Dancer* drove on to the mouth of the bay, heeling hard over from the thrust of the wind. A tow-headed man was at the wheel and his legs were spread on the slanting deck. He lifted a hand with a club-like fist and shook it once at the gun on the cliff.

A shell was the answer. It holed the jib. A second tore splinters from the deck, but the next shot missed the *Dancer* completely.

The schooner rushed on. Forward stood a tall dark man with a line coiled over his arm. There was a noose in the end and he lifted it high. Then silent as death and equally sure he waited there at the *Dancer's* rail with his eyes upon the *Wanderer*.

"Velasquez," said Red. He was laughing now—a peculiar sort of a laugh. "He's come to claim his schooner."

"Why does he carry that line?" asked Mark.

"'Tis a custom that's old as the sea," said Red, and he turned those flaring eyes toward Tanya. "Ten fathom of line with a noose in the end—sure, it's more than enough for a pirate."

The gun crashed again and a stay was cut; but the *Dancer* seemed to be circled with luck. She was close in now—five hundred yards—and each minute brought her closer. Pederson's voice came over the water as he roared an order to the crew.

Now the gun on the cliff was holding its fire. The schooners were beam and beam. The *Dancer's* bow dropped down with the wind and she raced past the *Wanderer's* stern.

"Now, Pederson! Now's the time!" cried Red. The wheel spun and the *Dancer* turned in a beautiful pirouette. "Ah, me! The Swede is a sailor!"

Captain Schmidt had gathered his men and now they waited near the rail as the Dancer's bow came into the wind. The schooner's headway carried her on while her canvas rattled as her tall sails luffed.

Then a rifle spoke and a man on the schooner put both hands to his chest and sat down. There was another shot. And then a third.

The *Dancer's* bow rubbed the *Wanderer's* beam. Smoothly, quietly, the two ships closed.

Captain Schmidt took careful aim at Velasquez, who still swung his rope; but he'd waited too long. Velasquez leaped and the line went twisting through the air. It caught the German full in the face and the captain's shot went wild.

Mark felt something tug at his wrists. He turned and found Tanya at his shoulder. Her fingers were working at the lashings that bound his arms behind his back.

Flanagan's hands were already free, and just for a moment the great red man crouched at the rail while he flexed his fingers. The crew of the *Dancer* was swarming aboard and the Germans were running to meet them.

"You're free," said Tanya. Her voice was low.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SEA-PATCH

MARK rubbed his hands and looked about. Four wooden belaying pins were racked at the stays. He grabbed one and started forward.

And just ahead of him went Red Flanagan, leaping along the *Dancer's* deck like some monstrous jungle cat. Red laughed as he ran, and he laughed as he hit.

A German moved a gun into line but his wrist was caught in a crushing grip that made him scream aloud. Red lifted him high and ran to the rail.

The German screamed again. Then Mark heard a splash and Red was back looking for Captain Schmidt.

Mark saw a close-cropped head nearby and he swung at it with his belaying pin. He hit a shoulder but that was all right. The German staggered.

Mark tried a second time. He heard the pin hit and he liked the sound, then turned to block a thrust from a knife. He took the blade on his forearm and wrist.

It was strange, but he felt no pain. He swung again and the man went down. Mark looked for another and found Velasquez standing at his side.

The tall dark man was showing his teeth in a most peculiar grin. His hands were tight on a German's throat and he shook the man as a terrier might.

Mark heard a snap. And then a laugh. Velasquez reached for another.

And up ahead sounded Flanagan's voice. It roared above the noise of the fight.

"Hi, Captain Schmidt!" cried the big red man. "I've a debt to pay for Griffith and Burke! Will you try a waltz with me?"

MARK wanted to watch but he didn't dare. Men were swarming the deck of the *Dancer*. He lifted his pin and ran toward one, then felt a hand on his shoulder.

Velasquez was laughing and shaking his head. "The fight—it is over."

It was as he said. These men were friends—deep-water men of the Indies. They raced to the halyards. The mains'l broke free and climbed quickly up the mast.

Mark heard the rattle of anchor chain and the sound of a deep-sea chantey. Hurrying feet walked the capstan around. More canvas flew aloft. The *Wanderer* felt the urge of the wind and put her best foot forward.

There was little work for a novice to do. Mark would only be in the way. He turned and saw Tanya at the rail. Beside her was Connie Lunquist. Both women watched the forward deck where two men faced each other.

Captain Schmidt was a heavy man. His arms were long and his back was strong and he knew how to use his fists. He was using them now, in hard, punishing blows that slammed against Flanagan's jaw. Red took them in silence and kept moving in. His arms were spread and his fingers were wide. His chin was tight on his chest.

Then those arms reached out and closed like a vise just under the German's elbows. One of Red's hands found the wrist of its mate. It locked and Red started to squeeze.

The veins went black on the captain's forehead as he tried to break the grip. His chin lifted high and his head dropped back.

He tried with a knee and battered the face that was held so close to his own.

"Do you like my waltz?" whispered Flanagan.

"*Mein lieber Gott!*" gasped Schmidt.

Red dropped his chin on the captain's chest and his monstrous shoulders arched. Mark heard a gasp that was almost a sob.

Then he felt a hand on his arm. Connie's fingers were clenched on his wrist. Her eyes were wide and her cheeks were drawn as she watched the struggling giants.

"I think we'd better go aft," said Mark quietly.

"Yes—please, Mark."

As he turned away Mark saw another woman watching the fight: Tanya, who might have been watching a dance for all the emotion she showed. He started toward her, then changed his mind. It was Tanya's man who was fighting.

VELASQUEZ was aft at the wheel of his *Wanderer*, and the schooner seemed to know it. She was doing her best, and a good best at that. Her sails were full and her stays were taut; the lee rail dipped in a smother of foam as she followed the *Dancer* out of the bay to the blue water of the Caribbean.

Velasquez grinned. "My darling, eh? They think they can steal my sweetheart?" He shook his head and his teeth gleamed white. "This is not so! These fools should know Velasquez would come to get her!"

The schooners were racing bow to stern, and now the gun on the cliff picked up. The shell came first and landed wide, then the sound of the shot came bucketing after.

"Oho!" cried Velasquez. "They try to stop us! They want us to stay but Velasquez is in one very big hurry!"

The next shot was bad and so was the third. Then the gun crew settled down. A shell broke water just under the stern and spray dashed over the wheel.

Mark looked at the cliff and watched the flashes; and he knew what it meant to be helpless. He wasn't afraid but he wanted to answer, wanted to hit back.

Connie had left for the cabin. He didn't blame her. It wasn't easy to watch that gun throw steel at the schooners. Mark wondered if he ought to go below and talk with her.

Then he stopped wondering. Connie was coming across the deck with bandage and antiseptic. Mark glanced at his arm and wished he hadn't. The cut suddenly started to ache.

"Let's have it," said Connie. She tore the shirt away to his elbow. "If you're not the darndest nuisance I ever met you'll do till he comes along. This arm is a mess. So is your head."

"It's worth the scratch to get such a nurse," answered Mark. "But don't you think you should stay below and do what you can for Hugo?"

"He's all right, except for a bit of cussing and damning, angry because he missed the fight."

A shell landed aft and Connie winced but she went ahead with her work. Velasquez watched and nodded his head, then he turned to wink at Mark.

"She is brave, that one," he said. "The shells are close but she is not afraid."

"Don't kid yourself!" snapped Connie. "I'm frightened to death."

Velasquez laughed. "By Gar! So am I."

"Then stop laughing and show it," said Connie. She finished with Mark's arm and dabbed antiseptic on a cut that streaked Velasquez' cheek. "Your schooner is lazy. I could make better time on a bicycle."

VELASQUEZ sighed as he glanced at Mark and his shoulders moved in a Latin shrug. He turned and lifted a hand in welcome to Flanagan who was coming toward the wheel.

Tanya walked at Red's side and there was amusement in her eyes when they met those of Velasquez.

"I noticed you swinging a rope with a noose," she said. "Was that meant for me, Velasquez?"

"For certain!" he answered and nodded his head. "Just so soon as I get one moment of time I will stretch your pretty neck."

Red's laugh was loud as he looked at Tanya. "What did I tell you, me lady?"

Mark wanted to ask about Captain Schmidt; then he realized there was no need. The only men on the *Wanderer's* deck were those who were old to the Indies. The others were gone.

And as he looked he heard the scream of another shell. This one was close. The gun had the range.

The next shot crumpled the *Wanderer's* rail as it plowed past into the sea.

"Pederson's clear," said Flanagan, "or they couldn't be favoring us alone. Five minutes more and we'll make it, too."

The gun was firing faster now. A tops'l shredded and a spar came down. Then a shell crashed into the deck and drove clear down through the hull.

The *Wanderer* staggered and slipped down wind. Velasquez spun the wheel. The bow came up and she held her course.

The next shell landed just off the stern. The next was further back.

"Made it!" cried Red. He pointed ahead. "Now make for yonder island, Velasquez. The tide is running toward the ebb so don't lose any time. We'll careen the schooner and plug the hole, then back to Vanity Point."

The crew of the *Wanderer* was already at work. Some ran below to build a quick bulkhead. Others were rigging a collision mat. Two loops of line had gone over the bow and men were hauling them aft.

Still others had brought a spare sail on deck and carried it to the rail. The lines were made fast to two corners of this and the canvas was started over the side just forward of the hole.

Velasquez put the schooner hard up. When she slowed to a walk the lines were hauled from the far side of the deck.

The men bent their backs and the sail ran over the side. The wash of the water eased it astern until it had covered the hole.

Then the lines were made fast while the rest of the crew raced below to help build the bulkhead. Planks were torn from the splintered deck and even the broken spar was used.

But now the schooner had gathered headway and Velasquez steered for the island.

CHAPTER XXIX

GOODBYE TO A GIANT

THE afternoon was almost gone when Mark Hallam climbed with Connie toward the crest of the hill that centered the island. He paused a moment to look out over the Caribbean.

Pederson's schooner was anchored off shore and his men were working with Velasquez' crew, racing the tide that was coming back, as they patched the hull of the *Wanderer*.

She'd been careened high on the hard white sand of the gently sloping beach. And just beyond, near the *Dancer's* small boat, Red Flanagan walked with Tanya Padilla along the water's edge.

They were hand in hand and their heads were close; and once Mark saw Flanagan lift an arm to point toward the anchored schooner.

Mark turned away. Connie's fingers were twisting a blossom of wild Sea Island cotton whose seeds had ridden the warm tropic wind that came from the nearby Barbados. A tangle of fern was about her ankles and the spiked green leaves of a century plant reached almost to her shoulders.

Connie lifted her head and the bright sun built a sheen on the mass of auburn hair. She looked along the winding path, then turned to glance at Mark.

"How soon do we leave for Vanity?" she asked.

"Red claims the *Wanderer* will be afloat within three hours. That means we'll probably reach Vanity before midnight."

"And then?"

Mark shrugged. "A radio message to Admiral Stackley and a suggestion for target practice. Either that or a quick trip to Washington for a personal report."

"What happens to Tanya?"

"I'm sure I don't know. She's Red's prisoner, not mine."

He took Connie's hand and climbed the rise to the leaning palm that Red had described as an excellent place to sit and watch the gulls. It was all Red had promised.

Connie seated herself on the trunk, patted her hand on the smooth wood and looked questioningly at Mark.

"This was Red's idea, you know," he said. "He insisted I bring you here for the view."

"The view? Is that the reason you came all the way up here?"

"One of the reasons."

"What's the other?"

"A red-headed girl with very blue eyes, and a very bad temper, too."

"My temper is always under control," said Connie. She looked at Mark and grinned. "Well, almost always."

"Can I depend upon that?"

"If you do, you're crazy."

She continued to grin at him, and her eyes were very bright now and she leaned a little toward him.

MARK drew a deep breath. "Red said the same about Tanya. They were up here a while ago." He smiled and leaned against the tree beside Connie. "I wonder what they were talking about?"

"Themselves, of course."

"They're a strange pair, Connie. I doubt if there are two people like them in all the world. Eternal wanderers, searching for something without a name. Treasure, they call it."

He laughed and glanced at Connie. "When they find a treasure they don't know what to do with it."

"Why do you say that?"

"That oil well of Tanya's," Mark chuckled. "She asked me to give it to Madam Tulon."

"But why did she drill for oil if—?"

"Merely as a blind so she would have a reason for being in the Indies. She didn't expect to bring in a well, and when she did, she gave it away. She's like Red: only happy when she's searching the world for an indefinite something. A something neither of them will ever find alone."

"Perhaps they'll find it together," said Connie softly.

"Perhaps," said Mark. He turned and looked toward the anchored schooner. Then he lifted an arm and pointed. "Look, Connie! The *Dancer's* mains'l is going up. That's odd. I didn't know there was anyone aboard."

"Neither did I." Connie swung her legs and jumped to the ground, then turned to look at the *Dancer*. "Mark—on the branch of that tree!"

"What is it?"

"Come here! If you stand next to me and look at the *Dancer* you'll see something hanging from the branch just ahead of us."

MARK did as he was told. On a level with his eyes as he looked at the schooner was a small leather pouch that hung by a thong. He walked forward, took the pouch from the tree and looked at it curiously.

Connie was at his shoulder. Her fingers wiggled as she reached for the string.

"Open it. Oh, hurry!"

"It belongs to Red," he answered. "It's the pouch he always wears about his throat. You've seen it before, Connie."

"Open it!"

Mark drew the string and dipped inside. A folded paper crackled against his fingers. He spread it, and the two black pearls rolled into his hand—Red's stake in the race they had never run.

There was a message on the paper, written in bold, broad characters—letters that looked as if they could come only from the hand of Red Flanagan.

Mark started to read but Connie was impatient: she snapped the message. Then her mouth went round and her brows went high as she looked at Mark and then again at the paper.

"Listen to this," she said quietly. And she read: "When you see the *Dancer* put to sea, no doubt you'll find this, too. Pearls for your lady's ears, Mark; you'd have won them if we raced."

"The devil I would," muttered Mark.

"Be quiet!" said Connie. She continued: "I've paid Pederson for his schooner, though Tanya suggested we steal it. A rare one, that red-headed girl of mine. I doubt that I'll know a moment's peace for the rest of me natural life. And neither will you if you take my tip and ask—"

"Go on," said Mark. "Finish it."

"If you take my tip," Connie continued, "and ask Connie to be your wife. But who could resist them, the beautiful things, with their flaming hair and lovely eyes and lips that taste of the morning's breeze when it ripples across the Caribbean?"

"Is that all?" asked Mark.

"Not quite."

"What else does he say?"

Connie looked again at the paper. Her voice was low: "So take your Connie tight in your arms, and kiss the tips of her tiny ears—I've tried it with Tanya and found that I like it—and turn again toward the sea to wave a long farewell to me, for Red Flanagan's found his treasure at last and he's taking her far away."

"And that's the end?" asked Mark.

"Yes," said Connie.

Mark took one of her hands in his. He dropped the two dark pearls into the curved palm and rounded the fingers

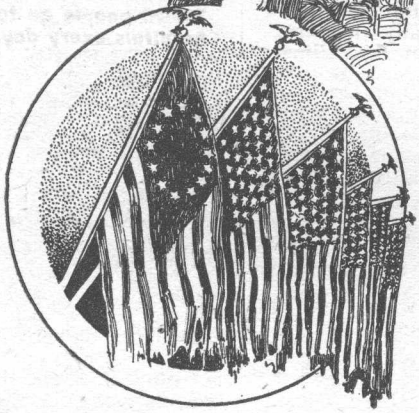
(Please turn to page 50)

LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS

·WINNING HIS SPURS·

Today, an expression meaning that a man has attained a recognized standing in his field. It had its origin during the Middle Ages, when a young squire, for conspicuous gallantry, would gain knighthood and the right to wear golden spurs.



·U·S·WAR FLAGS·

In each of its major wars the United States has flown a different flag. That is, the flag has had a different number of stars at the time of each successive war. During the Civil War the Union flag had 13 stripes; 34 stars.

· TRIREME etc. ·

The names Octereme, Quinquereme, etc., describing ancient warships, are generally supposed to denote the number of tiers of oars on the vessel. However, they must have had a different meaning, as their freeboard would have prohibited five or eight superimposed banks of oars.

·BUNK FATIGUE·

This bit of U.S. Army slang means to steal a nap in the daytime, or when the sleeper is supposed to be busy.

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

RECENTLY we received a particularly interesting account of how one of our readers judges a story. In brief, he says that if he can see the story, then he knows it is good.

Apparently he is a man with a very strong visual imagination, and so reading a vivid description of a place or an incident is for him precisely like seeing it in front of him. A picture forms in his mind, static or in motion as the moment of the story requires. If the picture doesn't take form, if it is blurred and confused, he considers the story unsatisfactory.

Undoubtedly that is a sound way to judge a story, providing that the reader is equipped to do it. That is, providing that words bring pictures into his mind. But they don't for everyone; in fact, the visual imagination is seldom as strong as our correspondent's seems to be.

We would guess that a good many people can follow a story clearly and with enjoyment and yet not see it happening. It disappoints them if it doesn't seem plausible, if the people are unreal; but they think about the story rather than visualize it. One method is not necessarily inferior to the other; they're just different.

Well, all this has been very abstract, and we're out of our depth. So we'll turn quickly to the gentleman who is responsible.

G. R. TOWNSEND

I wonder how many of your readers read a story the way I do. I got to thinking about it the other night and I decided to write in to Argonotes just out of curiosity. This is how a good story affects me: I read it and I see it just as if it were a scene outside my window or as if I were at the moving pictures.

For a long time I didn't realize what happened when I was reading. But one time I started wondering why I didn't like a certain story and I finally decided it was because the story wasn't real and clear. I couldn't see it; it was just words. So then I realized that I had to see an actual picture of what happened and where it happened or else I didn't like the story.

For instance, I could see the Legionnaires and the fighting in Robert Carse's "Stepsons of France"; I could see the whole thing just as if I had been there. But I have never been to Africa in my life. Another case is a Mase McKay story. I can always see the 'glades when I am reading one of them.

On the other hand, I have read a half dozen serials about Old California by Johnston McCulley and they all seemed poor to me because I couldn't see them. I haven't any idea what that part of California used to look like.

What I want to know is do all people read this way or not?
Dallas, Texas

LET'S hear from the rest of you about your methods of judging a story. Do you read as Mr. Townsend does? If not, then how? The subject is a fascinating one.

Our next correspondent wants to know what has happened to Dave McNally. Well, that amiable miracle man was absent from ARGOSY for quite a while; but you will be glad to know that we have just received a new story about him. It will be reaching you shortly.

PHILIP WITHERBEE

I have got a complaint to make. Where is Dave McNally? What has happened to him? A couple of years ago we used to get plenty of stories by Richard Wormser about his freak-hunting hero. Not any more; not in a long time anyhow. As far as I am concerned Dave McNally is the best series character in ARGOSY, and I don't want to see him dropped. So wake up Mr. Wormser.

Now that I have made my complaint I want to compliment you on the serials that have been in ARGOSY recently. They are better than ever before, I think—especially the ones by Max Brand, Judson P. Philips, Richard Sale, Louis C. Goldsmith and Bennett Foster. All different and all good.
New York, N. Y.

Again it is pleasant to make space for our indefatigable correspondent—

W. W. LLEWELLYN

Here I go again!

How about asking Nelson S. Bond to write us a long fantastic serial? I think that Bond is about the best in this field, except perhaps Edgar Rice Burroughs. So how about it?

I like the idea of having a short short story complete on one page. Keep it up.

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San José, Cal.

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FAREWELL TO THE INDIES

(Continued from page 47)

above them. Then he did as Red Flanagan had told him to do, and he too, found that he liked it.

"Look," said Connie when she was able to talk. "The *Dancer's* leaving the bay."

Mark stood with Connie and watched the schooner. He lifted a hand and waved it once. He thought he saw an answering wave from the red-headed giant who stood at the wheel with one arm about his lady.

Then the *Dancer* tacked across the wind and put out for the open sea.

THE END

LONG ROAD TO TOMORROW

(Continued from page 23)

got a hunch you will. I've heard your voice sound like that before. More power to you, Dikar." He tried to pull away, and in the dark Dikar could just make out his twisted grin. "Good luck, boy."

"Wait, Walt." Dikar held on. "Listen. There's somethin I want you to do for me when you get back to Norrisdam. I —I couldn't lie to Marilee. I couldn't tell her I was just goin away for a little while so—so I didn't tell her anythin at all. Will you go and tell her that I—that I've gone away from her, far an far, an that I'm not ever comin back. Will you, Walt?"

"No. I won't tell Marilee that you're not coming back. I don't even want to think of it myself. You are coming back, Dikar."

"Maybe I am. Maybe a long, long time from now, when we've chased the Asafrics out of America I'll come back to Marilee. But I can't till then, an I don't want her waitin and waitin for me.

"I want her to be mad at me, so mad that she'll stop lovin me. The first hurt will be worse that way, but it will be over quicker, an then Marilee will forget me an—and find herself another mate."

When Walt spoke, his voice was low, and kind of shaky. "I guess you're right. I guess— All right, I'll tell her." He rubbed his hand down his leg, stuck it out at Dikar.

Dikar took Walt's hand and squeezed, and then Walt was going back to the truck and Dikar was going toward the River, through the tumbled jungle of the burned houses.

The blackened timbers were almost as thick as the trees of the woods, but they did not smell like the trees. They must have burned a long time ago, but the smell of their burning stuck to them, and there was a smell of something else that had burned—not wood, but flesh.

Dikar stopped all of a sudden, the blackened timbers blotting out any sight of sky or road, the rough wood hurting his feet. He stood rigid, his lip curling, a prickle running up and down his back.

Dikar couldn't see anything. He couldn't hear anything, but he knew there were eyes on him, somewhere in this dark.

Dikar's hand went to the butt of his gun, closed on it. Someone hidden in these black, gaunt ruins was looking at him.

There was a sudden swoosh, behind him, and a burst of leaping light. Walt had fired the truck. Out from between two black timbers a wild shape leaped at Dikar, knife gleaming as it sliced down at him. Dikar brought up his gun to shoot—

From behind, cold fingers clamped his wrist, jerked the revolver sidewise.

(To be continued next week)

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